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## Welcome to the Sanitarium

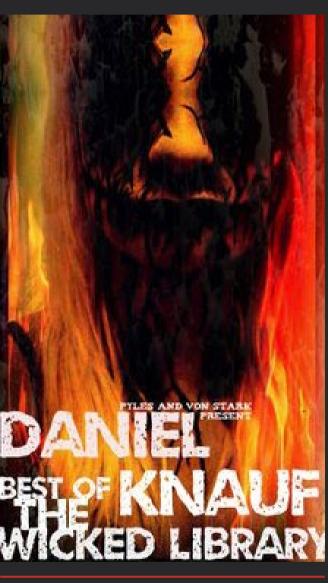
If this is your first visit or your 27th, we welcome you and we hope you enjoy your stay. We have great stories and featured to keep you entertained.



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We See "Where the Horror Happens" with Rich Hawkins

## Publisher

Eye Trauma Press

## **Editor**

Barry Skelhorn

## **Contributors**

Eric Nelson Shellito Michael Lindsay Stephen Williams Aaron Martz James Park Niko Hart G. D. McFetridge Lloyd A. Green

## Dark Verse

Kyle Short Colin Brooks James Michael Shoberg

## **Staff Writer**

Andrew Squires R. Donald James Gauvreau

## Koffinkids

by David Gacey

## Publisher Media

Eye Trauma Press 2 Cyprus Row 27a Cyprus Road Burgess Hill, West Sussex RH15 8DX, United Kingdom E. hello@eyetraumapress.com

## Cover

by. Kevin Spencer



## ISSUE TWENTY SEVEN

Dear Reader.

Well Halloween came and went and for the most part it was quite a good one. There were some interesting new releases, the local "haunt" near the Sanitarium office was well received and might be on course for another award (more to come on that early next year).

For horror writers however this time of year can be a frustrating one as well. As everyone seems to be putting out a "scary" story on one guise or another. Or their website has a spooky theme added. But as soon as the sun rises on the 1st of November, the theme changes back and they return to which ever genre they normal write in. I understand it is a free marker but horror is for life, not just one month or even a day for some.

Anyway enough on that, this months issue has 8 fantastic stories for you, along with 3 dark verse, an interview with the Wicked Library and we see where the horror happens with Rick Hawkins. The website is starting to fill up with interviews, news and reviews. So f you have a moment or two check out the site and if you have any feedback, let us know. Until next time, we hope you enjoy this issue.

Welcome to the Sanitarium

Barry Skelhorn Editor



/Sanitariummagazine



@sanitarium\_mag

Eye Truma Press, 2 Cyprus Row, 27a Cyprus Road Burgess Hill, West Sussex, RH15 8DX, United Kingdom



## NEWS

## Up and Coming Markets

### WHISPERS FROM THE ABYSS VOLUME 2

We want authors hungry to play in the twisted universe envisioned by H.P. Lovecraft, or write tales that are in the spirit of his mythos. Like Lovecraftís own work, the horror in this anthology aims to be subtle and subjective. The mind and its inner working are a far more terrifying place than the actual corridors of Rílyeh or the Mountains of Madness.

Ideally this anthology should hit readers like a really good mix tape (or iMix for those of you too young to remember what a cassette is). We want a variety of styles, themes, and moods that hook the readers fast, creep the hell out of them, and leave them wanting more. Experimentation is highly encouragedñespecially unconventional narrative styles, meta-fiction, genre mash-ups, even sick humor. Of course, donít be afraid to stick with the tried and true iravings of a madman,î if thatís your jones.

Deadline: May 30, 2015

Length: 2,500-4,500 words

Payment: 1 cent/word + digital contributor copy. Two print copies will be provided once the book is printed in 2016.

Submission Guidelines: <a href="http://01publishing.com/submissions/open-call-whispers-from-the-abyss-vol-2/">http://01publishing.com/submissions/open-call-whispers-from-the-abyss-vol-2/</a>

## **CURIOSITY QUILLS PRESS**

Curiosity Quills Press is a publisher of hardhitting dark sci-fi, speculative fiction, and paranormal works aimed at adults, young adults, and new adults.

Length: 15,000-120,000 words

Payment: Royalties on print & ebook sales + 5 free print copies

Submission Guidelines: <a href="https://curiosityquills.com/submission-guidelines/">https://curiosityquills.com/submission-guidelines/</a>

## FROM THE CORNER OF YOUR EYE: A CRYPTIDS ANTHOLOGY

Bigfoot.

Nessie.

The Jersey Devil.

Creatures moving in the twilight between fantasy and reality. Beasts that delight, mystify, and terrify. Cryptids are everywhere, in the water, running on the land, or even soaring overhead, challenging our faith in what science knows. From mermaids taunting our ships and Mexican goat suckers who feast on livestock (if weire lucky) to the Jersey Devil soaring overhead, belief is only a blink away.

Deadline: January 31, 2015

Length: 3,000-8,000 words

Payment: \$25 + contributor's copy

Submission Guidelines: <a href="http://www.greatoldonespublishing.com/submission-information/anthologies/from-the-corner-of-vour-eve-a-cryptids-anthology/">http://www.greatoldonespublishing.com/submission-information/anthologies/from-the-corner-of-vour-eve-a-cryptids-anthology/</a>

## **SUNNY WITH A CHANCE OF ZOMBIES**

Knightwatch Press are putting together a brand new zombie anthology, and we need your brains.

Sunny with a Chance Of Zombies is set for release in Summer 2015, and weire looking to fill it with a collection of strangely uplifting stories to go with the lighter season.

Have you got what it takes to bring something new to the walking dead?

We want original ideas that defy the expectations of our readers. Surprise us with your settings, bring us some new or skewed perspectives, horrify us by all means, but above all make us smile.

Deadline: December 10, 2014

Length: 2,000-6,000 words

Payment: Royalties + eBook contributor

copy

Submission Guidelines: <a href="http://www.scorchedflower.co.uk/knightwatch/submissions/">http://www.scorchedflower.co.uk/knightwatch/submissions/</a>

## **CURIOSITY QUILLS PRESS**

What they want:

Curiosity Quills Press is a publisher of hardhitting dark sci-fi, speculative fiction, and paranormal works aimed at adults, young adults, and new adults.

Length: 15,000-120,000 words

Payment: Royalties on print & ebook sales + 5

free print copies

Submission Guidelines: <a href="https://curiosityquills.com/submission-guidelines/">https://curiosityquills.com/submission-guidelines/</a>

#### **PLAYROOMS**

Do you remember your childhood? Are all those memories happy ones? What about that creepy little doll that always seemed to be lying under your bedÖ the one that made you tuck your blanket around your feet so that it couldn't climb in during the night to GET you? Do you remember that as well? What about the scary old caretaker who shouted at you on your first day of schoolÖ what exactly was it that he didn't want you to see in the cleaning cupboard?

PLAYROOMS is an anthology where all childhood fears become real. Submissions should feature spaces associated with young children (bedrooms, tree houses, schools, nurseries, etc.) and/or toys, items, objects associated with childhood. Stories should also contain elements of the fantastical or supernatural. Let your fears run rampant with this!

Tales dealing with children suffering sexual assault in any manner are likely to be rejected. If something of this nature is integral to the plot of your story then proceed with extreme caution and tackle it as tastefully as possible. It is best avoided altogether. Deadline: May 1, 2015

Length: 3,000-6,000 words

Payment: Royalties

Submission Guidelines: <a href="http://www.scorchedflower.co.uk/knightwatch/submissions/">http://www.scorchedflower.co.uk/knightwatch/submissions/</a>



# Cedar Hollow Road

Eric Nelson Shellito

Physician: Dr. Roundtree 8245-AVD12



## CASE #52515

## Cedar Hollow Road By Eric Nelson Shellito

AVE YOU NOTICED EVERY SMALL TOWN in America has its own brand of charm... and its own barn full of secrets? Some secrets are only discussed amongst town folk at the local diner, and some are never mentioned beyond a hushed murmur and a knowing nod. If you're new in town, you may get wary politeness — growing eventually into true 'small town charm' — but stick around long enough, and who knows...? That "knowing nod" might just be about you...

It's a chilly, dark, over cast November morning in 1974. Sheriff George Baker has just finished reading the report on his desk. An overnight car accident. He's preparing to go into the department's observation quarter — Room #1 — to speak with Ms. Helen Thomas. His deputy, meanwhile, is questioning Linda Thomas, Helen's teenage daughter, in the only other room in the small town station. Both men want to get to the bottom of what happened. Both women, having been released from the hospital only an hour earlier, just want to go home.

The sheriff, a former athlete gone to seed, steps out of his office, heading down the hall, incident report in one hand and a coffee mug in the other. He's made this exact walk so many times during his career. It's a short walk in a small station, but it always seems to him to be a drudging march -- he's never enjoyed it. He walks past the room wherein his deputy and the younger Ms. Thomas have begun to discuss the night's misadventure. He knows his job as well as his deputy -- separate and corroborate. Make sure the stories match up and let the chips fall where they may.

Sheriff George: Ms. Helen Thomas?

Helen: Yes.

Sheriff George: Good morning. I don't believe we've met. My name is Sheriff George Baker. Can I get you some more coffee?

Helen: No, thank you, Sheriff... I'm fine.

Sheriff George: Okay. It says here, --as he vaguely motions toward the report-- that you've had quite a night. First, I want to be sure you understand that since your daughter turned 18 last week, we need to treat her as an adult. That's why she's with my deputy right now. He'll be asking her the same questions that I'm going to ask you. We need to get a better understanding of exactly what happened.

Helen: Yes, Sheriff... I'm aware of that now. It's just hard, you know? To stop being a mom.

Sheriff George: Believe me, I understand, Ms. Thomas. I'm a father myself. You're the lady who bought the old Miller Farmhouse on Cedar Hollow Road, correct?

Helen: uh-huh

Sheriff George: It also says here that you own the black, 1965 two door Pontiac Tempest that was found in a ditch not far from there. And, you said the accident occurred as you and your daughter were coming home from the grocery store last night. Is that correct, Ms. Thomas? Ms. Thomas?

Linda: Deputy, I already told you to quit calling me Ms. Thomas! That's my mom's name. My name is LINDA. --Exasperation and all the attitude of an 18 year old girl who is not happy to be where she is.—-

Deputy: All right then, Linda. So, how about you walk me through what happened as you and your mom were coming home last night from getting groceries.

Linda: Mom thought it would be a good idea to drag me along with her to the store so we could talk about why I hate this fucking hick-town so much! As if we're going to suddenly bond with some heart-to-heart in the toilet paper aisle or something.

Helen: (sigh) You see, Sheriff, after my divorce things have been pretty bad between my ex-husband and me. I decided to move out of state and start over. Linda is all I have now. I thought a small town would be a good change. I bought the farmhouse on Cedar Hollow Road because it was furnished. And way too cheap. I felt like it was a sign. Things were finally looking up for us. I know Linda is having a hard time with all this. —She, mimicking her daughter's attitude, doesn't do hick.— I'm trying to get her out of the house more, start getting to know the town. Maybe even meet some kids her age. I took her with me to the store. I know it's not the most exciting reason to get out of the house, but I wanted to drag her away from her trashy romance novels.

Linda: So, since your crappy hickville bridge was washed out from last week's rain, we had to take a detour. Mom likes to act like she's always got things under control. It took 5 minutes for her to get us totally lost on all those country roads. Sure, I mean, we made it there okay eventually but only with my help. But then, when we were coming back home... that's when Mom started in on me.

Helen: I just thought... (sigh) maybe we could talk about how things were going. She's a senior in high school this year, and I realize it was terrible timing to pull her away from her old school... Look, I know it's hard for her, and I want to let her know I understand... but instead of finding some common ground we started fighting. Like we always seem to do these days. So what does she do? She buries her head into one of those smut books she purposely brought along in order to tune me out! Well... after about 10 minutes though...

Linda: I looked up from my book, only to see that we were lost. Again. Seriously, I mean, how about instead of worrying so much about what I'M doing, you watch for fucking signs, Mom!

Helen: These back roads and the woods are so confusing to me, especially once it starts getting dark. There's just no landmarks! I guess I'm still trying to get my bearings. And Linda seemed determined to make things even worse, with that nasty attitude of hers.

Linda: Oh my God, Mom! I look away for a couple of minutes and you got us lost! Again!

Helen: Linda Elizabeth, do not talk to me in that tone. We're not lost. I'm sure our road is just up ahead.

Linda: So we're driving forever... and it's getting darker and darker. Then the rain starts. Mom puts on the windshield wipers and all you can hear is the wet road and the wipers going back and forth — back and forth. Until I want to just fucking scream. Anything to get that car trip over with!

Helen: That's about the time I realized that Linda was right: we were lost.

Linda: (frustrated shriek) I was so mad at her! Nothing to do but sit as far away from her as possible and stare out my side window. I could tell that Mom was picking up speed, probably freaking out that she didn't recognize where the hell we were. —-And, finally dropping the attitude— that's when I saw it.

Sheriff George: What did she see, Ms. Thomas?

Helen: (exasperated) Oh, I don't know. Linda thought she saw something. That's when she said...

Linda: Mom... did you see that?

Helen: See what, Linda? Please, I'm trying to drive here... Was it a road sign? (sigh) What? What did you see?

Linda: I think it was a person... lying in the ditch back there at the side of the road.

Helen: Oh, Linda, that's ridiculous... I didn't see anything like that. It was probably just a pile of branches or something on the ground.

Linda: Mother! I know the difference between branches and a person! I know what I saw.

Helen: You didn't see a person Linda — I'm telling you that right now. There's no reason a person would be out in the middle of these roads at this time of night. Look at this weather! It's dark and it's raining.

Linda: I know what I saw! We need to go back!

Helen: Oh for God's sake, Linda! Fine! I think we need to turn around anyhow. I believe we passed our turn a ways back.

Linda: It didn't take long for Mom to turn the car around, and we started back. I was scanning the ditches. It seems we drove further than we should have to see what I thought was a person.

Helen: So while we were driving I'm watching for our turn, and I keep reassuring Linda that what she saw was just a figment of her imagination. And that's when she screamed.

Linda: There Mom! There!

Helen: I slowed the car down and saw what she was pointing at.

Linda: Mom, STOP! There! Do you... see... it?

Helen: I see it. It does look like a person. But now you can see that it's just a bunch of branches? Okay, Hon? Now, no more talk about some poor person wandering out here. I've got enough on my mind just driving!

Deputy: So, then what happened?

Linda: Mom continued to drive, but the rain was coming down even harder now. The windshield wipers and the rain on the roof of the car was so loud. I could barely hear myself think. We weren't saying a word to each other. I'm staring out the side window and I start thinking to myself maybe what I saw could have been a bunch of branches and shit. But I knew it wasn't. I knew it wasn't. We've gone a lot further down the road now and still nothing. Mom finally figures out where we were. We're coming up on the turn for Cedar Hollow Road. Our road. And that's when...

Helen: Oh my God, Linda! Did you see that?

Linda: Wha?... See what? What are you talking about?

Helen: It was a person.

Linda: A person? Don't you mean a bunch branches and shit?

Helen: I know what I saw, young lady! It was a person. I believe the person is hunkered in the ditch. I am turning around!

Linda: Mom that's impossible! It can't be. We are miles from where I saw something and if one person out tonight is ridiculous, it's damned unlikely there are two. Mom, think about what you're saying. This is starting to FUCK'N freaking me out!

Helen: Linda, watch your mouth! Maybe we've been driving around in circles, I don't know. But there's a person out there who might need our help!

Linda: So, Mom turns the car around again, and we started to drive again. Away from home. Towards something that was... well... really freaking me out. I was getting a crazy bad feeling about it. I just wanted to go home.

Helen: I saw someone! I know I saw someone. They have to be right around here.

Linda: Mom, please. Please can we go home? We'll call for help. Please, Mom, pretty please, turn around. Let's go home. I don't like this. These back roads suck — and this whole town sucks, and I don't want to help some fuck'n homeless person sitting in a ditch at night. Please, Mom, please just take me home! We'll just call for help!

Helen: But I didn't listen. I kept driving further away. Further away from home. And towards whatever it was I saw. And that's when it happened.

Linda: Oh my God, Mom look! It is a person! The same one I saw! It's a girl, Mom!

Helen: My heavens Linda, it is a girl. She looks soaking wet. Is she hurt, do you think?

Linda: I can't - I can't tell - she's all hunched over. Maybe she's just cold?

Helen: You couldn't see her face. Her hair was black... wet... muddy. She was wearing a dirty yellow dress. No coat or jacket. She was looking down at the ground and her hair covered her face. I pulled over to the side of the road and beeped the car horn. She didn't move. Not at all. I thought she must surely be hurt. She was hunched down with her arms wrapped around her knees. And then she started rocking back and forth. I told Linda to roll down her window.

Linda: (panicked) Are you crazy? No! Mom, please, we gotta go. We gotta go! This is wrong! I don't like this! Drive away now! Please Mom! Mom please! I'm scared.

Helen: Jesus, Lind. Calm down and roll down your window!

Linda: No. I'm scared! PLEASE LET'S JUST GO!

Helen: As we sat there yelling at each other, the girl in the ditch stood straight up. She was staring straight down at the ground, but turned to the car. She stood still as a statue for a second and then started walking right at us. She moved weird, Sheriff. All stiff with her eyes fixed on the ground. She walked right up to Linda's window. And then... she finally looked up. Her face was... twisted. It looked... wrong. She looked like... well...

Linda: A ZOMBIE! Goddamn it, she's a FUCKING ZOMBIE!

Helen: I've never been so terrified in all my life. I've never seen a person look like she did. Linda and I were both screaming. She... it... pressed both her palms to her ears and began to...

Linda: SCREAM! With her eyes wide open! And with hate, like I have never seen. And her mouth looked all dark. Dark and wet. Her teeth were all weird. Black. And her eyes were sort of...I dunno... gone or something! There where NO whites. Just black. All black. And glisteny. She looked like... like... what I think a demon must look like, or something!

Helen: I - I — panicked and slammed the car into reverse. I hit the gas too hard. I spun the car around. And Linda was screaming...

Linda: GO - GO - GO!

Helen: I was shaking so bad. My whole body was trembling. Somehow, I found drive and tore out of there. And the whole time, that girl just keep shrieking. I know it must sound unbelievable. But I was scared. I had this feeling that I just had to get away. Far away. As far from her and as fast as possible. I don't say this very often, but I should have listened to Linda.

Linda: We were heading towards our house, but Mom was driving really fast. Way too fast. She was all white and I could see her shaking. I guess she lost control of the car. We spun across the road and the car slammed into the ditch. It flipped on its side. But that wasn't the worst part. We weren't very far away from where that thing was!

Helen: I-I must have hit my head when we rolled. When I opened my eyes, I saw Linda had hit her head pretty badly on the dash. Her face was covered in blood. But, it looked like she was coming to. I was so light-headed and confused. I reached over and opened Linda's door. She was groggy, but managed to climb out of the car and I followed behind, pushing her butt up and out of the car. For a second, I was so relieved. We both seemed ok. I turned around to see where we were and I saw...

Linda: That fucking scary-assed BITCH! She was walking right towards us in that creepy stiff walk. And then, it got worse. Way worse. She started running. And she was running right at us.

Helen: Linda was screaming...

Linda: Run, Mom, RUN!

Helen: Linda ran and I - I - I couldn't move! I just stood there. I wasn't even sure what was happening. For a second, I thought I was hallucinating all of this. She looked so... insane. This couldn't be real. She was bare foot and was running... no... sprinting. She was sprinting right at us. And staring! It was like her head didn't move. She just kept coming, staring right at us. Her dress... Isn't it odd the things you notice? Her dress was on backwards... and inside out. No expression on her face as she ran... her eyes... I have never seen anything with eyes like that. And then she started shrieking again.

Linda: I looked backed, only to see Mom in total shock. She was just standing there. Just standing! I didn't think — I turned back to get her. When I reached her, I grabbed her arm. I'm pulling her and I'm screaming. And she's just standing there like a statue...

Helen: ...and Linda's screaming at me. RUN, MOM! MOM, RUN! I snapped out of it. We ran. I never ran so hard in my whole life. It felt like I wasn't even touching the ground. The rain was pelting my face and I could see my breath in the air. There was a little moonlight, but not enough to really see. I looked back... I don't know why... and she was still there. Still running. Chasing us. I still didn't know what was real. Why was that girl out in the rain? Why did she look like that? And why was she chasing us? Why was she screaming? Why was I so scared?

Linda: Mom's no runner and was slowing us down. I didn't know how we could make it all the way to our house before that thing caught us. We needed help. We needed the police. Or the army. Or something. Someone. But, we were in the middle of nowhere. All alone. I was afraid that... I thought... I thought we were going to die.

Helen: I was running behind Linda. Just focusing on her. Trying to keep up. It took me a minute to realize she had run off of the road and into the woods.

Linda: It was the quickest way to our house. I felt like we would be safe if we could just get home. I could see the lights that we left on at the house through the scraggly trees. So, I ran. Ran toward the light.

Helen: Everything was weird colors. Pale shades in the moonlight. It was pouring. It was cold. I just knew we were going to die.

Linda: It was like a nightmare. We were running, but not getting closer to the house. I could see the light. I could see our house. But I knew we weren't going to make it. The trees were slowing us down. I fucked up... we shouldn't have gone in the woods. Who runs into the woods when a demon is chasing you?

Helen: I just kept following Linda, but the ground wasn't flat. There were roots and branches. I kept stumbling. I knew I was slowing down. I was falling behind. I couldn't hear anything but my heart pounding and that horrible screaming. And the screaming was getting closer.

Linda: I fucked up! It was all my fault. I shouldn't have said I saw anything when we were driving home. I should've kept my mouth shut! It wouldn't have been in her head if I hadn't said anything. And I shouldn't have gone into the woods. What was I thinking? We should have stayed on the road.

Helen: Linda was just so much faster than me... All I was thinking was, "catch up, Helen, catch up!" I just needed to move faster. Move faster or... die.

Linda: It was hard. It was so hard to run in the woods and to keep looking back over my shoulders to see where Mom was. Running on the road was easier. We should have never gone into the woods.

Helen: It was impossible. I couldn't do it. I tried to keep up with Linda, but it was just too hard. I was about to yell out for Linda, to tell her to get to the house and forget about me.

Linda: I ran as hard as I could. We'd be safe if we got to the light. The light would save us. I looked back. Just for a second...

Helen: I was running to the point where my legs could not keep up with my body. I was flailing on every step. The ground was moving so fast underneath me. I felt like I was above me... looking down on me running. Too fast. I stepped into a hole or something. I rolled my ankle and my legs just collapsed. I felt myself falling. Branches scratched my face. I hit the ground. Hard. I hit face first. Chin first, actually. I nearly bit through my bottom lip. My head was ringing. My face was in the dirt. I knew where 'up' was... but couldn't orient my legs and body. I managed to turn my head to the side. Over the ringing, I could hear the screaming girl getting closer. Everything stopped. I remember staring at the faint moon. Seeing my breath rising. The rain falling off the branches and hitting the ground in front of me. Everything seemed so slow. And I knew. This is it. This is how I die.

Linda: Mom was gone, just gone! I turned around. I had to find Mom! I had to find her. We had to get to the light. Before it was too late. I nearly stepped on her. It was so dark and she was lying so still. But there she was. She looked dazed and there was blood all over her face.

Helen: I felt Linda's hand trying to pull me up...

Linda: MOM! GET UP! I was pulling on her arm, trying to get her up. Something was wrong. And it hit me. The screaming had stopped. The only noise was my blood pounding in my head. I took my eyes off of Mom and saw... that DEMON BITCH was standing right next to me.

Helen: I could see her. Just standing there. Standing next to Linda. Not a sound from her. She wasn't breathing hard or anything. She was even more terrifying up close. I wished Linda had kept running. That girl put its palms over her ears and started screaming again. She was so close that I could have reached out and touched her. You have to understand, I normally help other people. But this wasn't a person. It kinda looked like a person... but it was something... else.

Linda: I yanked Mom up from the ground and this time we ran. Hand in hand. We didn't stop. We didn't look back. We ran. We ran right out of those woods. We ran closer to the light...

Helen: We ran through the meadow between the woods and the house. I could feel blood running down my chin and filling up my month. My ankle was killing me. I was trying not to fall. We ran up the front porch steps towards the front door. That's when it hit me. MY KEYS! My God, my keys were in the car! I had asked Linda to lock the front door when we left for the store. We made it to the house... but couldn't get in. We were trapped — outside — with that — that thing! All that running. For nothing.

Linda: When we got to the front door I pushed it open and pulled Mom inside...

Helen: Thank GOD! Linda didn't do what I told her to. She didn't lock the front door. I slammed it behind us and twisted the deadbolt as hard as I could...

Linda: We ran upstairs into my mom's bedroom and I shut the door and locked it...

Helen: We could hear the screaming girl outside, pounding on the front door like a mad person. The screaming was like nothing I've heard before. It had become unnatural... unholy...

Linda: I grabbed the phone from the nightstand. Mom said...

Helen: Linda, we'll hide in the closet — bring the phone.

Linda: Luckily the phone cord reached from the wall all the way to the closet, and we both got inside and shut the door. Mom turned on the closet light and I dialed the operator...

Helen: The operator put us through to your office, as we sat in my closet. Soaking wet. Panting. Both of us covered in blood and mud. And the screaming never stopped. It was inhuman. It sounded like she was going to break the door down. How can a person pound on a door for so long and so hard without stopping? The pounding and the screaming kept on and kept on. And then it stopped. Silence. One heartbeat. Two. Three. Nothing. We both held our breath and waited. Before we had a chance to exhale, the pounding on the door started. We both screamed and it took a moment to realize that the voice on the phone was saying you were outside. It was your deputies banging on the door. And that's how your men found us.

Linda: You guys took us to the hospital to get checked out...

Helen: And now we're here.

Sheriff George: Okay... well then... this is what we know...

Deputy: We did find muddy handprints all over your front door. And muddy bare footprints on the front porch. So it does look like someone was at your front door...

Sheriff George: This isn't the first report we've gotten about an apparently insane girl with black muddy hair running through the country roads...

Deputy: This morning we pulled some other reports, and we also have an artist's sketch from one of them. I would like you to look at this...

Sheriff George: Is this the young woman that you saw last night?

Linda: FUCK, YEAH— THAT'S HER!

Deputy: Her name is Mary Jane.

Helen: So... who is she?

Sheriff George: She and her father lived in the very same farmhouse that you own now. It was just the two of them. Her mother died when she was young. Her father did the best he could, running a farm and raising a girl.

Deputy: One night a couple of men broke into their house. They killed her father and then took turns raping Mary Jane.

Sheriff George: We don't know how... but later in the evening she was able to escape into the darkness. (sigh) It wouldn't surprise me if she went mad that very night...

Deputy: She made it to the side of the road with only a dress on. It was on backwards... and inside out.

Sheriff George: In an attempt to flag down someone to help, she ran out in the middle of the road to stop a car driving by...

Deputy: The driver didn't see her in time, and hit her.

Sheriff George: Mary Jane – the young woman you apparently saw – well she died in 1952, over 20 years ago.

Helen: But how can that be? I saw her. She was real. She was as real as you are to me right now!

Deputy: Some people say she haunts Cedar Hollow Road and the house she once lived in to this very day.

Linda: (frustrated scream) I HATE THIS FUCKING HICK-TOWN!

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#### The Farm House on Cedar Hollow Road

It was a cold, rainy autumn night. The wind was blowing in the back woods outside a small town in America. A farmhouse sits off on the side of the road. The dirt road they call Cedar Hollow. Inside the old farmhouse is a 1930's style radio playing music in the background. The farmer's dog is barking outside in the rainy moonless night. A seventeen-year-old girl is in her room reading a romance novel. Her father, a widow farmer, sits in his rocking chair reading the day's newspaper in their parlor. The farmer's dog keeps barking — then abruptly stops. A moment later, the farmer looks up from his newspaper. He stands up from his rocker and turns off the radio. He listens, but all that he hears is the rain, the thunder and the wind. There is no barking. The girl in her room hears nothing. She's in her own world of romance. The farmer walks to the back kitchen door, calling out for his dog. Without warning, a man comes from around the corner of the house and hits the farmer in the face with the butt end of the shotgun he's carrying. The farmer falls backwards into the kitchen doorway, bleeding from his nose. The stranger then uses the barrel of the shotgun to choke the farmer, dragging him back into the house. He kicks the door shut behind him. The girl, hearing the back door slam, is startled out of her book. She quickly moves downstairs to check on her father. As she enters the kitchen, she sees her father. The stranger. The gun. The farmer gasps, "Run Mary Jane!" Mary Jane turns and runs to the front door of the house. Before she can get out, another man rushes in through the front door and throws her to the floor. She hits the hardwood — face first. The man drops on top of her. He holds her head up by the hair, making her watch as the man in the kitchen beats on her father. The farmer manages to get in a good kick, sending his attacker sprawling. The farmer grabs for the shotgun. The noise is deafening. Mary Jane is forced to watch as her father's chest erupts in a crimson spray. His body slumps to the floor, blood pooling around him. The man in the kitchen, shotgun in hand, looks right into Mary Jane's eyes. He smiles. The man on top of her begins to tear her clothes off. Her vision starts to go black. She starts to fade into unconsciousness as the two men begin their unspeakable mayhem... on her.



Eric Nelson Shellito

Details Not Released at this Time



# The Siren

Michael Lindsay

Physician: Dr. Peterson 8268-WCT29



CASE #86845

# The Siren By Michael Lindsay

THREE PAIRS OF YELLOWY OVALS MATERIALIZE out of the night, dilating by degrees until they become snarling military cargo-trucks which slow to a stop on the trail running through our campsite. Engines are synchronously switched off. Doors swing open, cadre climb out. Each proceeds to the rear of his truck where canopies are flipped up and tailgates dropped. It's like watching a ballet, except the ballerinas look like linebackers.

The cadre from the first truck positions himself just off the trail while the other two standby, hands clasped behind their backs. Fifteen shivering men gather around, eager to get started.

He turns on his headlamp; we follow suit. After briefly consulting his clipboard, he begins the now familiar process of calling out color-number identifications.

"Mancuso, Blue 14!"

"Leonard, White 33!"

"Estivedez, Topaz 71!"

"North, Green 43!"

I hoist my rucksack and double-time to my assigned truck. Tonight, I'm in truck three.

Between me, the other four "candidates", and our eighty-pound rucksacks, it's a tight fit. An expressionless cadre throws up the tailgate and secures the canopy flap so we can't see where we're going. The trucks come to life - in unison, of course - and creep forward along the rocky, uneven forest trail. I situate my rucksack between my legs and get comfy. These rides can be damned long.

In my experience, nothing invokes deep thoughts like being sealed inside a pitch-black compartment. Without fail, I reflect on the path which led me here, auditioning for the world's most elite military unit.

I enlisted in the U.S. Army eight years ago, a fresh-faced high-school brat. In my town, guys are either farmers or vagrants. Neither appealed to me. As an infantryman, I served with the 101st Airborne and got trigger-time in Iraq and Afghanistan. I love my job. I love my comrades. I love

serving my country, and I thought we did some real good things for people who hadn't seen a whole lot of good in their lives.

But in my heart, I knew I had more to give.

I was signing up for Green Beret Selection when a buddy floated the idea that I should try out for THE unit - the one that doesn't exist.

The Delta Force.

After weeks of cryptic emails, confidentiality agreements and stilted phone conversations, I officially volunteered to attend the "Advanced Land Navigation Course."

I was an instant celebrity. Everywhere I went, guys clapped me on the back even though all I'd done was sign some papers. I didn't even know what the selection process entailed.

But I quickly found out.

The plane ticket I was provided took me as far as Anchorage, Alaska. Then I was packed onto a greyhound bus with a bunch of other fidgety men and taken further north. Past Fairbanks, the road-signs stopped. Two hours later, we turned onto an overgrown access road where a fleet of military cargo-trucks awaited.

The next morning we were escorted into the mountains and dumped off with only a map, a compass, two canteens of water and a sixty-pound rucksack. The cadre, a hulking man who spoke only as many syllables as necessary, gave me grid coordinates to my current and next locations.

"Show me where you're at and where you're going," he barked after I plotted the coordinates. I did and he nodded. "Move out."

And so began Delta Force Selection.

One thing quickly became clear about Alaska: If this is God's country, as some insist, then He's got one ugly sense of humor because this is the most iniquitous tract of land in all creation. Three weeks I've tromped back and forth across this state and still I haven't found a single piece of flat real-estate that's larger than a campsite. I've made climbs so steep that I felt like Jack clambering up the beanstalk, and once I got high enough, I saw nothing but snow-capped peaks in all directions. It's like counting treetops in a forest. Most of the terrain is blanketed by mountain laurel, a loathsome combination of shrubbery and tree which looks like squids with their heads jammed in the ground. Hundreds of them will weave together into lattices thicker and tougher than a wall of sand-bags. I've spent hours fighting through them only to emerge exactly where I started, a bloodied and beaten mess. And apparently this entire area used to be a volcanic hot-bed because moss-covered obsidian juts from the ground, slippery as ice and sharp as a pickaxe.

Most of the candidates who've "failed" Selection were carried out on stretchers.

Sixty or so men hitched a ride on that Greyhound bus and just us fifteen remain. We roam the wilderness like misshapen phantoms; we barely eat or sleep and have regressed into cadaverous versions of our former selves. My body, the framework which my entire profession hinges upon, is showing its mileage. Every bounce of the truck sends rockets of pain from the bottoms of my feet. My knees are as puffed up as water-filled balloons. Rucksack straps have eaten clean into my shoulders; an outsider might think I've been beaten with a stick.

Yet for all that, I've avoided major injury. I'm still in the game.

The truck slows to a stop. I check my watch. Almost an hour. The others pick their heads up and look around. One guy we have to wake up. I'd kill to be that mellow.

We follow the cadre's footsteps as he gets out and walks around the back of the truck. An eye peers through the canopy flap. "Green 43, secure your gear and report to the front of the vehicle." "Moving, Sergeant!"

I'm first up, which is an encouraging sign. It's borderline torturous sitting in the cramped truck waiting to hear my number called. Plus I really need to piss.

The other candidates shift so I can squeeze through. I hop off the tailgate and sling my rucksack over my shoulder. The chilly breeze is a welcome comfort after being locked inside the truck. I go to the driver's window.

"Green 43, Sergeant."

"Your coordinates are on the hood. Plot them and report back to me."

I turn on my headlamp on and do as instructed. The movement doesn't seem too bad; only a few kilometers and no major shifts in elevation. But then again, we never know how many

movements await us. Could be four. Could be fourteen.

The cadre double-checks my work. "Move out, Green 43."

I take extra time to properly adjust my rucksack. The key to hauling an eighty-pound hunk of shit through the mountains is getting a fit so clean it's like an embrace. Then I check my compass bearing and take off.

A few hundred meters in I stop to piss, exhaling loudly. No need to be tactical way out here. At least a pound lighter, I begin my journey.

I hate navigating at night, even with a headlamp. Outside of its puny radius of light, darkness consumes all. Marrying the map with what I see on the ground is virtually impossible, so that jouncing compass needle is my lifeline. Out here, alone and possessing only the most basic survival tools, a lot can go wrong, which is why it's so damned exhilarating!

The movement to my first point proves fast and uneventful...until the siren. It cuts into the soundless night like a shriek. I've heard its kind before. Downrange, when mortar-fire or RPGs are inbound, you hear a sound like that. It means get under cover or they'll be using calipers to police up what's left of you.

I've been the caliper-guy. It's a transformative experience.

I stop and conduct a map check. Lots of streams and slopes and trees in the area; nothing manmade. That's inconclusive, of course. Half the places the Army has taken me didn't make it onto maps.

After two minutes exactly, the siren stops.

In its absence, the night grows three shades blacker and takes on segregative attitude, as if I'm quarantined inside a pocket of shadow. The meager sphere of light spiraling from my headlamp is choked into submission. It's probably just nerves, but I begin to hear things: heavy footfalls in the distance, and a labored, almost dilatory breathing, like two burlap sacks being rubbed together.

To regain some mastery over myself, I re-check my compass bearing and increase my pace. Shortly afterwards, another headlamp appears out of the gloom.

"You hear that, man?"

"Fuckin' weird," he replies. "I thought nothing else was out here in the boonies."

"Me neither," I say.

Conversations in the wilderness usually aren't any more extensive than that so we nod and part ways. I'm still a kilometer from my point, roughly thirty minutes given the terrain. That's not far, but the siren has filled me with a peculiar dread. Gone is the equanimity I normally feel when I'm on my own, trekking beneath a star-filled sky. I'm constantly checking behind me, though I see the same trees and bushes everywhere. Night cinches about me like a noose-

My imagination is running wild. I sip from my canteen and remind myself of what I'm trying to accomplish. This is The Delta Force, the highest echelon of military bad-asses. A case of the heebie-jeebies won't shine too brightly on my assessment.

Finally I spy headlights and happily break into a trot. The cadre rolls down the window and sticks his head out.

"Color and number?"

"Green 43, Sergeant."

"Show me your route, Green 43." I do, and he says, "Roger. The coordinates to your next point are on the hood."

I hesitate. "That siren a little while ago....what was it?"

He doesn't reply. I put my headlamp on his face and see that his eyes search the darkness and he's wringing his hands so hard that his knuckles crack.

Eventually he says, "Focus on your training, Green 43."

Maintaining an illusion of self-possession is essential to my line of work, but never has it been harder than now. I plot my coordinates and return to the cadre. He barely spares me a glance. "Move out."

Now I'm really worked up. What could possibly unnerve a guy like that? I conclude that he recognized the siren, so whatever it means, it isn't good. Part of me, the same part that gets butterflies every time the shooting starts, wants to drop the rucksack and hold fast. Something's wrong, and when it officially goes cattywompus, I'd rather be here than in the middle of the woods.

But I'm not going to do that. Not in a million years. The other part of me, the much bigger part who's captaining this vessel, would rather die than quit.

I adjust my rucksack and move out.

After settling into a comfortable rhythm, I try to let my mind wander but the siren indiscriminately erupts in my head. For some reason, it makes me think of Chernobyl and all the empty buildings sitting out there like the leftovers of a lost civilization. Those sad sacks must've heard a siren, too, right before absorbing enough radiation to melt a steel girder-

Screaming!

That's not uncommon out here, especially when guys are lost or caught up in mountain laurel, but this is different. This is an articulation of rage and pain that my soldier's mind cannot fully process.

It doesn't even sound human.

Not knowing what else to do, I squat and sip my canteen. The scream dies out and Alaska is back to being soundless and empty. Maybe that's all it ever was and my head's screwing with me. I've humped these mountains for weeks with no break; I'm exhausted, malnourished and stressed-out.

Yeah, that's it.

Just to be safe though, I flip off my headlamp. I've gone some ways before I realize that I'm running-

Another scream!

This one is human, and it's much closer. It twists into a call for help, and then a plea to God. Neither answers. At its highest timbre, it's sheared off and there's a flapping noise like a guidon beaten by wind.

And there's something else, too...is that...a crying baby?

The rucksack slips off my back and now I'm sprinting. Hulking shadows spring out of the darkness; I bounce off trees and slabs of rock like a rubber ball. Not even mountain laurel slows me down.

I'm climbing out of a ravine when I trip and slide face-first across the ground. Something sticky coats my hands but I don't linger to investigate.

I soon arrive at an intersection between two dirt roads and find an Army cargo-truck parked there. I've no idea how I'm going to explain my missing rucksack but I'm too relieved to care. I'm actually smiling when I walk up to the driver's door.

Until I see that no one's inside. On the seat is the cadre's hand-held radio and clipboard, which they're never without. I look in the back of the truck. No candidates. With panic beginning to reassert itself upon me, I recon the area by moving in concentric circles around the intersection, calling out as loud as I dare-

"Anyone here? This is Ben North. Come out!"

Nothing.

I grab the radio. It's still on but the volume is turned down. As I rotate the knob, a mishmash of hysterical voices scrabble over one another.

"-an't see it! Somewhere northeast-"

"-candidates are all over! No way to-"

"-ucking see it! Coordinates seven-two-four-niner- wait...it's turning – oh god! OH GOD –"

"-two bodies floating in the creek-"

"-Thorne! Thorne! Do you copy-"

"-DYING OUT HERE-"

I call for help but my transmission is overridden by all the cross-talk. I listen for another few seconds, then turn the volume back down and lock the truck. The only idea my rattled brain can muster is defeated as the engine sluggishly turns over but doesn't start.

I turn on my headlamp and gasp. The sticky stuff covering my hands is blood, so much that it looks like I'm wearing red gloves. My shirt's covered, too. That thing I tripped over...

My headlamp also shows me why the truck won't start. The entire front end is sliced open, as if by a giant talon. The engine fumes sadly.

My options are few, and waiting here alone isn't one of them, so I get my next coordinate from the clipboard and plot it with hands that are hopping around like goddamned crickets. Without double-checking my work I turn off my headlamp, jump out of the truck, and rush into the

forest.

Not one-hundred meters in, a humpbacked figure appears ahead of me and I'm running too fast to stop. We go to the ground in a grunting and growling tangle and I'm certain that I'm about to be devoured by some nameless beast.

Then a light flickers on above me. Am I already dead?

"Holy shit, man! He's one of us!"

Strong hands lift me from the ground. Instinctively, I rear my fists.

"Whoa man, take it easy! We're candidates, too!"

I turn on my headlamp to find one man with his hands held up and another picking himself off the ground. I see why I'd mistaken him for a humpbacked thing: he's still got his rucksack on. Blood streams down the side of his face.

"I'm sorry," I say. "I thought you were...I don't know what I thought you were-"

"Forget it," says the bleeding man, "we've got bigger problems. Something's out here. Saw it awhile back. Fucking huge. It's killing guys- what's that?"

He's pointing at my hands.

"I tripped over something out there. I must've been one of us-"

"Where you coming from?"

I show them on my map. "Nobody's there and the truck's destroyed. What did you see? What is it?"

"No idea. It ain't human, though," says the second man.

"Is there a baby with it? I heard crying."

They glance at one another and a mutual terror passes between them. "We got to get out of here," whispers the bloodied man.

"Let's stick together," I say. "We'll move in a wedge and keep our eyes open. I'll take point."

"Sounds good to me," he says.

"What about that?" I nod at his rucksack.

He looks back at it with total surprise. "Ain't adrenalin a bastard? Forgot it was even there-" "Shhhhh!"

We look wildly around; I'm painfully aware that our heartbeats sound like thumping drums. There's other noises, too; wind whistling through mazes of branches, chirping insects, crackling deadfall - ordinary things which have taken on a sinister aspect.

Just when I can't take it any longer, the man exhales in relief.

"Sorry. Guess I'm losing it-"

An enormous shadow slides out of the brush and snatches him off his feet as though he were a weightless plaything. He screams for help but we are capable of nothing but stupefied astonishment.

"That's it! That's it! Gawd!" yells the bleeding man. He stumbles backwards and disappears into the night, his rucksack once more forgotten on his back.

"Don't go! Heeeeelp!"

The doomed man reaches for me but I'm backpedaling, too. . I've just conjured up enough wits to flee when there's a sickening crunch and he goes silent. Then I hear a greedy slurping, and a long, satisfied groan. A moment later the man thumps down at my feet like a newspaper hurled across a yard. The poor bastard's all shriveled and purple like a prune.

The monster roars and it's so loud that my brain feels pinched in a vice. I know I'm screaming only because my throat burns. When it finally stops, I hear something else: a half-strangled whimper. It's such an unexpected sound that I forget I'm supposed to be escaping.

Shoving aside trees like stalks of corn, the monster advances on me. My only defense is to gape in horror, utterly confounded that I should die in such a way. It enters the range of my headlamp and I see a long, scaly arm which sparkles like a sheet of diamonds. It reaches for me, not with a hand, but with a snapping pincer claw.

Just then, some nearby bushes rattle and out pops the bleeding candidate. In his terror, he'd run in a perfect circle, ending up face-to-face with the very monster he'd fled. It roars and scoops him up, rucksack and all.

Finally, I run for my life.

His dying screams hound me but there's nothing I could've done. A thing like that can't be killed without some ordinance heavier than my two hands-

I never see the fallen tree – or the drop-off beyond it. It bucks my legs from under me and once I'm finished tumbling down the hill, a gnashing pain radiates from my hip and my ankle's swollen up inside my jungle boot like a turkey sausage.

C'mon, Ben! Push it! PUSH IT!

Sometime later – I have no idea how long – I fall against a tree, ropes of saliva dripping from my mouth, fire sweeping through my lungs. I manage another twenty meters before I collapse and puke. After my stomach's emptied, I drag myself against a tree; I've never been what you'd call a praying man, my convictions rest solely on things that go boom, but I'm suddenly unleashing every skeleton in my heart to God-

Voices...human voices! They sound close, too!

A hundred meters later I stagger into a clearing where two cargo-trucks are idling. Cadre and candidates alike scramble into the backs of them. The drivers look like spooked animals ready to bolt.

"Barely made it, man! Get in! Get in!"

Without breaking stride, I launch myself over the tailgate of the first truck and land atop a pile of men.

"Go! Go! Go!"

The truck fishtails across the clearing and even though our flailing bodies hammer the sides of the truck - and one another - a chorus of cheers goes up. But then we screech to a halt and before any of us can asked what's happened, we're speeding backwards for too fast for the other truck to react. The collision is so violent that men are hurled into its windshield. Smashed bones and shattered glass make the same sound.

Before we can disentangle ourselves enough to help, the other truck vanishes before our eyes. There is a moment of eerie quietude during which those of us on the ground pant like machineguns.

Then yellowy ovals are flipping through the air and the truck crashes down, silencing the screaming voices inside.

"Drive! Drive!" we yell.

A deafening roar silences us; it's the sort of ovation I'd expect in Hell.

Just as the truck lurches forward, something smashes into it with the force of a wrecking ball. The truck flips across the ground, somehow landing right-side up, but not before tossing us around like lottery balls. The man who lands on top of me asks in a dazed voice where his arm has gotten off to. Another man's head is cracked open like an egg and leaks reddish sludge. I swallow several mouthfuls of blood before realizing that half my teeth have been knocked out.

The survivors ignite a stampede-

- "-run-"
- "-out of here-"
- "-off me-"
- "-my arm-"
- any notion of camaraderie deader than those we climb over. I'm nearly the first one out but someone else jumps past me, his boot grinding my face into the neck of a dead cadre.

Lucky me.

He's snatched up so fast he doesn't even have the chance to scream. The monster plunges its pincer into his chest, cleaving him in two. His still-kicking legs land on the roof of the truck; his upper-half is pitched into the forest.

Then the monster leans down and peers inside the truck. Our scattered headlamps flash upon a crustaceous face with five pulsating eyes set in a half-circle above a gaping mouth chock-full of bloody fangs. Two squiggly antennas protrude from its forehead and they probe the area as if picking up a scent.

But what rattles me to the depths of my soul, what I'd remember with excruciating clarity even if I lived to be a thousand, is what's attached to its head: a squirming human baby, its skin flaming red as if burnt. It looks at me with watery eyes flushed by unspeakable pain.

Then, perhaps sensing my revulsion, it begins to cry.

The monster rips off the canopy and plucks a howling man from the pile. Its antennas go berserk and the baby's cries rise into shrieks. The monster casually tears him open and its antennas inject into his innards. The baby immediately hushes.

That gets me moving. I throw aside the ponderous limbs of the dead and climb out of the truck. The monster, too preoccupied with another man who's tried to camouflage himself beneath corpses, doesn't see me.

But the baby does.

Its shrieks are renewed and the monster's terrible face whips around. In the darkness, I could not appreciate how long its arms are but it snaps me off the ground without even moving. I'm dangled in the air like a minnow while the creature inspects me. Its eyes glow as though some inner-lust has been kindled. The antennas prod my stomach, scoping for a way inside. Then the monster opens its massive mouth, but before I can be stuffed inside my leg gives under the pincer's pressure and detaches just below the knee.

The baby shrieks in indignation.

I land in a heap, astonished that I have the presence of mind to begin removing my belt in order to make a tourniquet.

The monster turns on me and I see that much of its body is covered by some kind of exoskeleton. It looks damn near bullet-proof.

Just as it's bending to scoop me up, a single gunshot rings out. The baby's writhing madly and something tumbles onto my head.

When the monster roars this time, it's from actual pain. It thunders through the clearing, flattening dead men beneath its feet, and disappears into the forest. I finish wrapping my belt around my stump of a leg and then search around for what fell on me. I quickly find it.

It's the baby's arm.

That's when I see them walking towards me; two men in dark suits, one older and one around my age. Identification tags hang from their chests but it's too dark to read them. They share a glance and then the younger one kneels next to me.

"How are you feeling, soldier?"

I offer him a toothless smile.

"You've been through quite an ordeal, more than any man should have to bear," he says. "What is your name?"

I spit out a glob of blood. "Sergeant First Class Benjamin North."

"Benjamin, I want to thank you for your service to this nation," he says. "I truly mean that. Thank you."

He squeezes my shoulder and for the first time since hearing the siren, I remember that an actual world exists beyond this black, depthless horror-show.

I don't see what's in his other hand until it's too late. He buries the knife into my chest, all the way to the damned hilt. Funny thing, most people think they'll gasp when they die but in reality, air rushes the other way, as if evacuating any vestiges of life.

I'm not sure what he sees in my face then – rage, fear, disbelief – but he at least has the decency to look ashamed of himself.

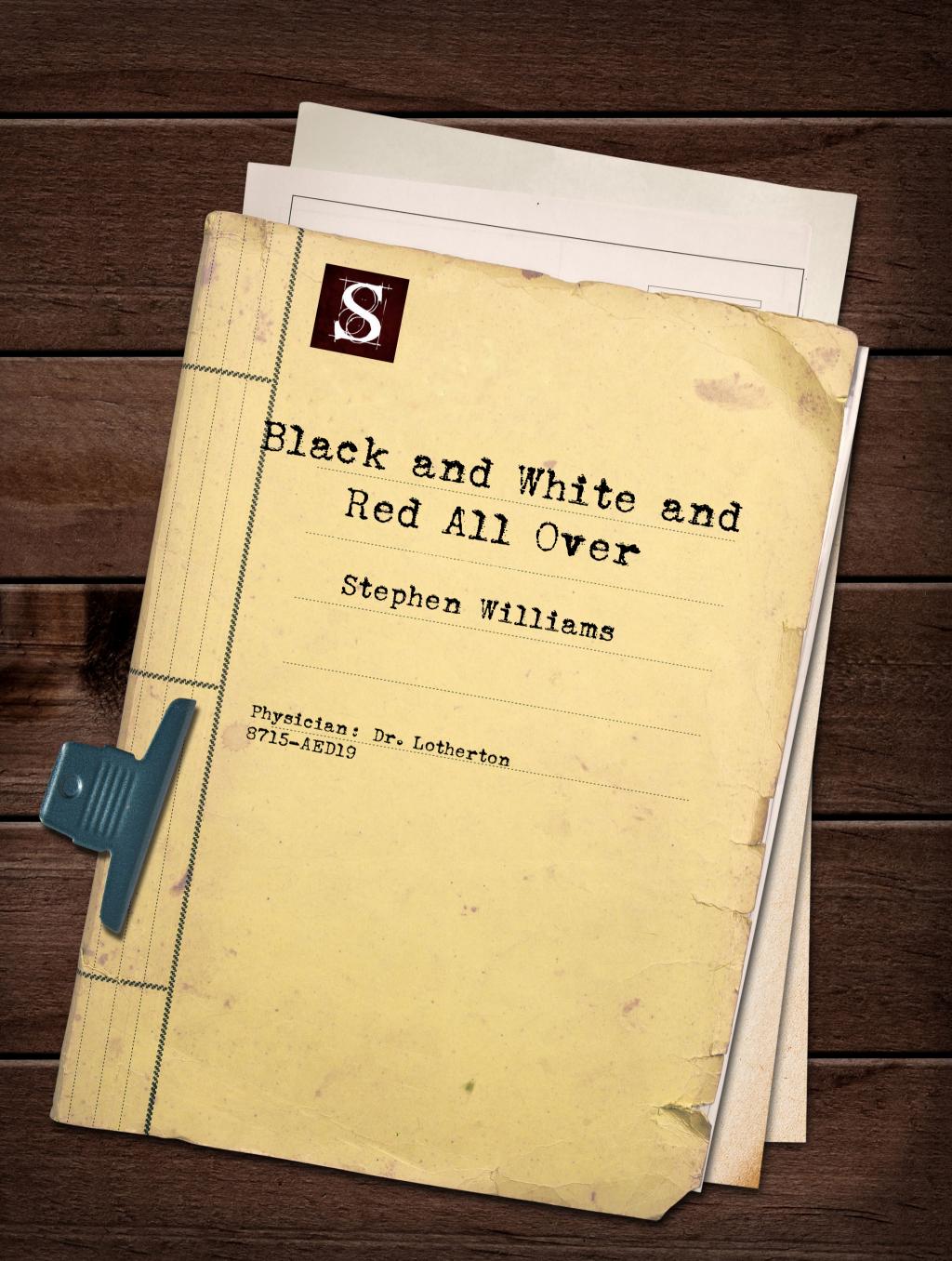
The End.



## Michael Lindsay

Michael Lindsay has served seventeen years in the United States Army, most of it in the Special Forces. He currently lives in Chugiak, Alaska with his wife and children. When not writing stories, he spends most of his time outdoors, exercising and reading. "The Siren" is the fifth short story he's published this year and you can find out about the rest on his Facebook page. He's self-published the first two parts of his debut novel "Clockwork" on Amazon for a dollar. It is the story of a young man who has the chance to alter the ruinous course of an entire country. Parts three and four will be published soon for the same price.

Facebook: TheworldofMichaelLindsay Email: Team\_Lindsay@yahoo.com





## CASE #83763

## Black and White and Red All Over By Stephen Williams

A FTER FOUR YEARS OF SPLICING COMMAS and scribbling stories, Milton the Zebra was the proud recipient of a BA in Creative Writing. He was ready to enter the world as an artist and craft the great African novel. From dusty sunrise to when the moon bleached the sand bone white, he sat in front of his typewriter, using the edges of his hooves to build the book one syllable at a time. Months later, he had eighty thousand polished words about what it meant to be a zebra coming of age. It was perfect.

With his head held high and a stack of envelopes taller than a termite nest, Milton began to send his work out to agents. Sadly, the rejections flooded in as fast as he could lick the stamps. Even Mr. Hippo over at Hippo, Hippo, and Associates turned up his bulbous nose at Milton's masterpiece. Self-publishing wasn't an option either, his platform didn't extend beyond the dazzle. With his dreams of being a novelist put on hold and his student loans looming over the horizon, he took an editing job at Baobab Breaking News, the local paper.

It wasn't glamorous work. Nearly every day ended with Milton in tears as he pored over the newest issue of Baobab Breaking. How the writers were able to bring home paychecks and not know the difference between "their" and "they're" astounded him. Slowly, he felt his dreams rot right out from underneath his feet.

Things continued this way until one night when Milton was working late. There was a faint tapping at the door, and when he answered, he was surprised to find an old acquaintance from school, Grant the Gazelle. Grant had published a novel with a prestigious small press that was already gaining some buzz on the awards circuit. He'd swung by to see if Milton was interested in writing a review for the paper.

Milton snorted at the request. Why did Grant deserve this success? What made him so special? There's no way he could have worked as hard as Milton. He was willing to bet his stripes on it. Before he knew what he was doing, the zebra began to chew. He nipped at Grant's neck, legs, and back. Soon, the gazelle was nothing but broken bones and strings of meat.

Despite the murder he'd just committed, Milton felt nothing. Grant had practically deserved it,

the way that he'd come around to rub his new book in Milton's face. The zebra finished his cup of coffee, cleaned up the remains using old newspaper, and left the bones to be picked by the army ants out back.

Life continued to move on, even though there were long stretches where Milton wished it wouldn't. He'd begun to write animal interest pieces for the paper—but it wasn't enough to keep the zebra happy. Every word he typed about a group of volunteer hyenas using comedy to cheer up sick cheetahs was like being skinned alive. After he'd proven himself to be boring enough to push out this dreck, his boss approached him to write a story about another one of his former classmates, Caleb the Crocodile. Caleb had recently landed a job at the amazon, the largest book distributor in the world. Baobab Breaking wanted a full write-up for the front page. The zebra would have to meet with the crocodile that afternoon.

Caleb seemed okay at first, the way he invited Milton into his home and offered him a drink—but it didn't take long for the stories to begin. The stories about how lucky he was—about how great his life had been since graduation—about how he'd be able to influence the literary world through his newfound career. The zebra couldn't handle it. Milton shut his eyes tight and began stomping on the crocodile's head until he felt the skull pop and brains turn to jelly. Milton finished his scotch, found a soft spot on the riverbank, and buried the corpse in the black mud.

This most recent act of bloodshed had inspired Milton to shelve his old book and work on something new. His next novel would be about the masks animals wear and how it was impossible to truly know anyone. He wrote the whole manuscript in two weeks, sent it off, and received a plethora of offers for representation. The stuck-up Mr. Hippo even came crawling back. With the release date set, it was time to drum up some publicity.

Not a problem, Milton thought. I'll find some of my author friends from school to write lovely quotes that will decorate the front cover.

It was then he realized that the posthumous winner of many awards, Grant the Gazelle, had long ago been turned into insect excrement.

Oh well, Milton continued. Perhaps I'll find someone at a bookseller to give me lots of free promotion.

That's when he had the epiphany that his greatest ally in the distribution world was decaying beneath the Nile.

Milton the Zebra was truly alone, and his book was destined to fade into obscurity. With all hope gone he made his way back to the newspaper, climbed the steps to the printing press, and hurled himself into its massive rollers. His blood painted the newest issue with gory streaks. This coagulating obituary was perhaps the best thing he ever wrote.

The End.



Stephen Williams

Stephen Williams holds a BA in creative writing from the University of California, Riverside where he won the Chancellor's Performance Award for excellence in fiction. His work has appeared in numerous publications, including Menacing Hedge, Underneath the Juniper Tree, and Goreyesque. Currently, he serves as an editor for Rind Literary Magazine. His debut novel, Among the Ruins, will be released by Villipede Publications in 2015.

Author site: <a href="https://twitter.com/StephenTBW">https://twitter.com/StephenTBW</a>



# The Violent End of Fred Neveland

Aaron Martz

Physician: Dr. Lichten 6428-SED41



CASE #25189

## The Violent End of Fred Neveland By Aaron Martz

BILL NEVELAND KICKED OPEN THE SCREEN door and almost tripped over the cat as it scurried out at his feet. He threw a kick at it that didn't connect and went around to the garden hose. He could hear the radio blaring in the kitchen, and they were still talking about him. The Black Car Killer. They had caught him in the bathroom of a restaurant, covered in blood and screaming, but before they could call the police he had taken off.

Bill finished drawing out the slack and dug through the reptilian pile of garden hose for the head, then dragged it around front hoping it wouldn't knot up on him as it always seemed to. He was sweating already. He had a light-colored purple shirt on that would be a different color in half an hour, and all he could think of at times like this was how he had never complained about the air-conditioning bill down at the office because no one would trust you to win their case if you looked like you would fail a lie detector test.

He came out from under the shade and the sun hit him like an open oven. He was trying to find the lawn sprinkler so he could screw the hose into it and turn that puppy on before his grass caught on fire but he didn't see it anywhere.

Where are my sunglasses?

He spun in a circle looking for the lawn sprinkler, holding the garden hose like a limp dick in his hand, tangling it in his feet as he went through his breast pocket looking for his sunglasses.

Is that it over there? No that's just a -

Is that the newspaper?

Hadn't he gotten the newspaper already?

He drew his hand out of his pocket and started to put his sunglasses on right over his prescription glasses, then took those off first and only then realized that he wasn't holding his sunglasses after all, but his reading glasses. He didn't like bifocals, he liked everything to be separate.

They are less inclined to trust an old man to win their case.

"Bill, lunch is ready!" Helen shouted from the kitchen. He could hear her scrambling around in there. It was impossible, it seemed, for her to get anything out of a cupboard without banging it around, and that's all he heard evenings after he got home from work and all day on the weekends, for she hardly ever left the kitchen, so it was clang, bang, skitter, slam sunrise to sunset.

"Bill, did you hear me?" Never gave him a second to answer, either.

"You know where the garden hose is?" he asked.

She came out onto the screened-in front porch. He could see her vague shape in there, dim and gray, squat and chunky, with an orange apron on to match her dyed hair. They had been married thirty-six years. "What did you say?"

"I said, do you know where the garden hose is?"

There was a long pause in which all he could hear was indistinct chatter from the radio. "Bill, you're holding it in your hand."

He didn't know what she was talking about. He had clearly asked where the garden hose was, and he wasn't holding the -

"Damn," he said, realizing he was holding the garden hose. "I meant, where's the lawn sprinkler?" "How should I know? Your food is getting cold."

He tripped going up the steps and flung the screen door open and heard it whine closed behind him. It was as hot in the kitchen as it was outside.

Helen was moving back and forth from the sink to the stove, washing dishes and cooking, and each time she went to the sink the floor moaned, and each time she went to the stove the tiles squeaked, so it was squeak, moan, squeak, moan, and in between she made little gasps and ums like it was all being timed, like she was on one of those cooking shows.

He took his seat at the table. The radio was loud in there. He didn't know why she always played it so loud. It was likely to make you hard of hearing like working in the factory was making him.

It was a different reporter this time: "The Black Car Killer, who went on a kill spree this summer after a four year dormancy, is the suspect in numerous slayings, and today not more than twelve minutes ago, police began a high-speed pursuit that is now -"

"Here you go, honey," Helen said and set Bill's lunch in front of him.

"Can you turn that thing down?" he asked. "Why do you always have it up so loud?"

"Is it loud? I can hardly hear it." She had hot mitts on and she went back and slammed the oven door, took the hot mitts off and draped them over the handle, then went back to the sink - squeak, moan - and started in on the dishes again. Then she reached out and turned the radio down just a smidge with soap suds all up her forearms.

Bill put his hands over his ears, then wiped them up his dome and across his forehead, and now they were greasy with sweat. It was a sandwich on toasted bread, looked like ham, turkey, and bologna. It looked like the same thing he'd get for eight dollars at the diner across the street from the factory. The one he used to take Fred to up until -

Up until what, Bill?

"Where's my napkin?" he asked.

Helen didn't seem to hear him - clatter, slush - washing the dishes over there.

"Helen!"

"What?"

"You forgot to give me a napkin."

"Oh, I'm sorry, honey." She took her hands out of the sudsy water and wiped them off on her apron as she darted across the tile to the paper towel dispenser. She tore one off, folded it into a square, and handed it to him, and he wiped his hands off and dropped it on his lap, then touched the plate -

"Ow! Christ! Why didn't you tell me it was so hot?"

"Bill, honey," she was laughing, "you saw me take it out of the oven." She caressed his face and made kissing sounds like she was pampering a baby, and he felt a chuckle building in his stomach, which was always what happened when she did this to him - one of their little things.

He batted her hands away playfully, feeling a blush coming on. "Let go of me, would you? Go wash the dishes." He poked at his sandwich, trying to find a way to pick it up without burning his fingers, then he took a giant bite, and, oh, she had put Italian salad dressing on it! He took another bite. Jesus God, it was better than any eight dollar sandwich!

"I'm being told they are reaching speeds upwards of ninety miles an hour. Police are trying to

clear the road ahead, but it's just - he's just - Oh my God, he almost hit that car -"

A great big glob of tomato and cheese fell out the back, and he scooped it up and crammed it into his mouth along with a bite of pickle. He wiped at his mustache where sweat had begun to collect. He could feel it on his brow. Why was it so hot in here? Had she forgotten to turn off the oven? Maybe she had another sandwich in there, keeping it warm for Fred.

Where is Fred anyway?

"Where the hell is Fred?" he asked after swallowing.

Helen walked over, pouring him a glass of cranberry juice. "I don't know. Maybe he's staying late. You did say it was a big week."

"What's that got to do with it? Whether they break their asses off or not, it's got nothing to do with us. We just mop the floors." Then something dawned on him. "Helen, it's Saturday. Fred's off on Saturday."

Helen was looking at him with evaporating concern. "Well, I don't know what to tell you," she said, then went back to wiping the dishes and putting them in the drying rack.

He wondered as he watched her how many times she had washed those dishes over the course of their lives together, and how many times she had washed them just today.

Maybe that's what she does. She dries them then puts them right back in the water without even realizing she's doing it.

Bill went to the window and looked up at the sun, looking for the sounds he could swear he was hearing. "I just don't want him out in this. It's hot out there."

Helen sounded worried now. "Bill, why don't you go out and water the lawn?"

Bill went to the screen door and peered out at the street, wide and empty, burnt out like a desert, and he could feel the sweat let go at his brow and drip down under the arm of his glasses where it coalesced in his sideburns.

"Let the cat in," Helen said.

Bill opened the door absentmindedly and went out, tripping over the cat as it came in, then spun on his heels and came right back through the door.

"Bill, water the driveway or something," Helen screamed. "You're driving me nuts!"

"It appears as if - Yes! - the Black Car Killer has pulled off the highway at the Belger exit. That would put him in the Summerfield suburb of Volohah."

Bill went outside. It felt like it was a hundred degrees out there. He walked to the side of the house, tripping over the garden hose splayed at his feet. He meant to turn it on, then he remembered the big thermometer hanging from a nail inside the front porch, and he looked back to see if he could see what the temperature was, but the bushes had grown over it.

Have to trim them.

He got down on his knees and turned the faucet on then went around front and saw the hose flipping around like a snake caught in a mouse trap, spraying the front of the house in a wide arc.

"Bill," Helen screamed, "the windows are open! Would you knock it off?"

Bill got the hose under control and started watering the lawn, then he went over to the elm tree and watered its base, then he went around to the pine bushes and gave them a rinse.

Something thundered in the distance sounding like the first tug on a lawnmower string, and Bill dropped the hose and looked across the sky. It was hazy over there where the highway was because of the pollution from the trucks.

He felt something snake between his feet, the goddamn cat again, and looked down, but it was the garden hose. The ground at his feet was soaked and muddy, and as he bent over to turn the faucet off, he saw a glare off something underneath the front bushes. It was the lawn sprinkler.

Must have kicked it under there when I was mowing the lawn.

He dug around in the curled snake for the end of the garden hose, then screwed the sprinkler on, hearing both the radio and his wife, and the increasing noise of what was definite and on its way, then he dropped the sprinkler in the center of the lawn, turned on the faucet again, then went back into the kitchen.

"He's not going to be able to make it," he said, seeing Helen at the stove frying up hamburgers with her oven mitts on. "They'll have all the roads blocked off. He's gonna miss dinner."

Helen gave a short scream, and he thought at first she had burned herself despite the mitts. Then she took the oven mitts off and threw them on the table and raised one hand to her brow,

and he could see she was overcome. Then she looked at him, and he had not seen her eyes so clear and blue since -

Since the trial.

"You know it's him, don't you?" she asked, her voice clean and sharp and unmistakable.

He went to the table to do something, but there was nothing to do. The dishes had been cleared and washed, his napkin thrown away.

"You've known for quite some time."

"Known what?" he asked.

Her voice when she responded was so shrill and loud it reverberated off the exhaust hood over the oven. "You know what's going on, and it's time something was done about it before he kills more people!"

Bill covered his ears, shaking his head vehemently, searching the fridge door for the condiments, for what was needed for their meal. "I don't know what you're talking about," he said.

"I'm talking about your son," she said very calmly. "He's killing people."

He walked back over to the table, making sure there were three chairs set out, three doilies, in case Fred came over.

"Bill, I want to know what you're going to do about this!"

"About what?"

"He is killing people. Your son. He's abducting them and killing them."

"It's not him," Bill said, smiling despite what he was feeling. Despite what he had been feeling for several years now. "This guy, this Black Car Killer, he's been killing people for a long time."

"Bill, you know it's him. Don't even pretend you don't."

Something cracked outside, something like firecrackers or a truck backfiring on the highway. That's what it was - a backfire.

You know what it was.

"Shots fired! Shots fired!" the idiot on the radio said. "We're in Summerfield now, where police have often speculated the killer must live or work."

Or both.

Bill saw the cat pawing to be let out.

"The cat wants out," he said, and he hated the sound of his voice, the pleading quality of it, as if he were asking his own wife for permission to let the cat out of his own house.

He went out with it onto the lawn, slipping and almost pitching on his ass from the wetness, and saw the sprinkler casting water in a peaceful arc back and forth. Oh, it was so lulling! How he wanted to watch it forever.

He could hear the gunshots getting closer. Squeal of tires, brief hum of a carburetor.

He wiped at his mustache, stooping over the flowers along the sidewalk, running his hands over them. Daisies mostly, some roses, some iris. They were coming in nicely. He had planted the bulbs back in March, and it was now -

What day is it?

He caressed a rose, his watch getting hung up on a thorn.

God, he remembered when he had bought him that car. Fred had lit up like a firecracker. For me, daddy? For me?

Remember when you were washing your car and -

He was washing his car once in the driveway, this lousy French vanilla Chrysler, and Fred had pulled up in that dirty black thing, and it was always dirty, he never seemed to wash it. Smelled, too, and he remembered Fred telling him -

"Get out of the way, daddy!"

He loved when he called him daddy. It was like he hadn't lost anything of what he had had when he was four years old.

He told Fred it needed a wash and to just leave it there, he would get to it, and Fred had said - What had he said?

"No, I wanna park it in back."

He always parked it in back -

Where no one could see it.

Covered it with a tarp because he cared so much about it.

You found blood in it. And hair. Women's hair.

He had sprayed Fred with the garden hose and said whoops, then hooted and hollered, and Fred had lit up knowing he wanted to play a game, and had gotten out of the car -

"Daddy, you sprayed me! You got me all wet!"

- and they had chased each other around the yard, spraying each other with the hose and soaping each other with the bucket, and Helen had come out and yelled at them for getting the house wet, but she had been laughing, too.

He could hear the helicopter, but he still couldn't see it, and the cars and the sirens were getting closer.

He trudged back into the kitchen, letting the screen door slam behind him, and Helen was waiting for him like he was a kid caught coming in after curfew.

"He got it from you, you know," she said.

Bill sighed and sat down in his chair. He saw that the ketchup and mustard had been set out at the table. Two place settings, though, not three.

"You have always been on the razor's edge of madness yourself. Frankly, I'm surprised you haven't succumbed more often than you have."

"Helen, I found a good-paying job. I've kept a roof over our heads for thirty years!" He put his fist down on the table and heard the plates and the glasses clang, heard the mustard bottle wobble, sounding empty. "I've helped raise our grown son, and now he's out there making a living! What more do you want from me?"

"No, you lost a good-paying job when they took away your license! You took what you could get and we settled for it!" She got right up in his face. "And I had to help keep this roof over our heads, or have you forgotten about that?" She leaned back. "And your son -"

"Our son! Our son!"

"Your son is a degenerate," she said.

"Don't say that!" He stood up, clenching his fists, ready to -

Rape her.

-give her a fat lip.

Helen laughed at him and he felt all the anger flow out of him like a stream of piss down his hairless legs.

"You lost your insurance and now we can't afford his pills, and that's why he's doing it again."

"He still has his pills."

"He's out, goddammit, just like the last time!"

"Helen ..."

"No. You were never going to do anything about it. You were just going to let him keep doing it until he got caught. Well, I think it's about that time."

The sirens were getting progressively louder, unmistakable now. Helen walked past him to the oven, slipped on her mitts, opened the door, and took out a plate of hamburgers already dressed and garnished. She set them on the table, six of them, and they looked just like the ones at the diner.

"What were you afraid of? Were you afraid he'd soil your name?"

Bill slumped in his seat, avoiding her eyes.

"Bill Neveland. Rapist."

"It wasn't me," he said.

"He's our son!"

"Oh, no," she said. "It was someone who looked dramatically like you. A bald, fat, middle-aged lawyer who mops floors now at the factory with his degenerate son."

Nobody will trust a felon to win their case.

"You're a degenerate, and he's a degenerate. Like father like son."

"Stop calling him that!" "You're lucky they let you weasel your way out of it, or you'd still be rotting in the pen, and your son - Who knows where he'd be then? Probably in the nut house."

"I disown him! I disown you! I disown this whole goddamn house!" She wiped the dishes off the table, scattering hamburgers all over the floor.

The cat started pawing to be let in. They both heard it mewing.

"No, it's not your legacy you're trying to protect," she said. "It's not your name." She got close to him, and he could see that she was grinning, that her teeth were bared. She looked like a lunatic, and what had she said about going to the nut house? "He loves you," she said. "He's the only one

that loves you. That's what you're trying to protect."

"Don't you love me?" he asked.

"No," she said. "I accept you. That's different."

He could feel tears in his eyes. It was just a wet day, with the garden hose and the sweat, and now this. "Baby," he said, and he could say no more. He cupped his hand over his face, feeling his wedding ring scrape the bridge of his nose, and he wept into his palm.

The girl was fourteen, but she had a body like a stripper. The camera crews had come in right after the police, and he had still had his pecker out, and he remembered he hadn't seen a camera like that since he had paid to have that commercial made. "I'll make your small claims pay out BIG!" The commercial had played one night while he was in county on a little black & white the guard sat watching.

He heard a boom like a concrete block being dropped into an empty dumpster, and he shot back in his seat and looked out the window.

The prick on the radio was jabbering again. "Oh, he hit an abutment! Is he - He's getting out of the car! He's limping! He's bleeding! Jesus, he's all covered in blood!"

Bill looked at Helen and saw his concern mirrored by hers. He shot to his feet, went to the window. He could see his neighbor across the street calling his children inside. Someone was barbecuing, he could smell it, or maybe it was the hamburgers lying on the floor behind him.

He heard the flap of a helicopter arcing across the sky, but he still couldn't see it.

"Tom, he's going into that neighborhood over there! No, that way! That way! Ohhh! Ladies and gentlemen, we've lost him!"

"Is that what it is?" Helen asked from behind him. "Do you need him?"

He turned to her and he didn't have to say anything.

She still had that look like she was punishing a child. "You selfish son of a bitch," she said. "You could have taken care of this. You could have had him institutionalized when you realized there was a problem."

"You could have, too," he said. "You could have stood up to me like you're doing now, but you're just as much of a coward as I am."

"You're absolutely right. But I am standing up to you, and I'm going to take care of this right this instant." She marched over to the phone, but he wrestled it out of her hand with a conviction he had not felt since he decided to become an accident claims attorney in law school.

"Don't you sabotage his life!" he screamed. "He never had a chance! I just wanted him to have a chance!"

Something slammed against the screen door and he thought at first it was the cat, but then he saw the shadow it had cast, how large it was.

It was Fred. He had come home.

Bill pushed out the screen door onto the lawn.

Fred was standing there with a desperate smile on his face, his long, stringy hair and his unkempt beard covered in blood and his lanky body, in its black clothes and boots, dripping with it.

Helen screamed from the other side of the screen door.

Fred flinched, still smiling, and wiped his hand across his forehead as if to brush his hair back. "What did you do?" Bill asked.

Fred's smile faltered and Bill could see that he was terrified. He kept looking behind him, down the street, out over the orange haze toward the highway.

Bill could hear the steady thud of the helicopter somewhere close by, and the police were in the neighborhood, maybe as close as the next block over. He gulped, trying to think of something he could do. He reached out to put a comforting hand on Fred's shoulder, but Helen shrieked and he withdrew it.

Fred started mumbling to himself, shivering, seeming like he was going to cry, and Bill wanted to hold him, rock him, like he had when he was a baby.

"Fred," he said, "maybe you should come inside. We'll get you cleaned up. We'll listen to the ball game. We were just having lunch. Are you hungry?"

Fred licked his lips. He saw the cat weaving through the bushes in front of him, and before Bill could stop him, Fred lunged at the cat, picked it up, and took a bite out if it. The cat screamed and flailed, and Bill stood there in shock, and Helen was so terrified the scream that was building

caught in her throat like a hunk of meat.

"Oh!" she got out. "Ohhh! Stop it!"

Fred dropped the cat and started to cry as blood ran down his face. There were tufts of fur stuck in his teeth and slivers of flesh hanging over his lips.

"Fred," Bill said, "come here, son. It's alright."

Fred wiped the blood off his mouth then seemed to see the blood that was all over him for the first time. He stuttered, then started to take his clothes off, to peel them off over his head the way a man would who had fallen into a lake.

"What did I do?" Fred asked, his voice high-pitched and cracking like a boy in puberty. "I'm all dirty."

"Oh Bill, do something!" Helen shrieked.

Bill backed into the house, letting the screen door slam in front of him. His son was hazy and gray now like he was watching him in a movie. He shoved Helen out of the way, seeing her pitch over one of the wicker chairs on the porch, then he ran into the house through the kitchen into the hallway.

He returned with a shotgun and aimed it at his son.

Fred was kneeling on the ground. He had stripped off all his clothes, and his body was streaked with blood like he had rolled in it. Helen was saying no, no, no, because she had seen the gun, and Fred clasped his bloody hands together as if praying and looked up at his father and pleaded, begging.

"Daddy!" he said, and Bill pulled the trigger and blew his son's brains all over his lawn as the sprinkler continued to arc back and forth, casting a rainbow mist in its wake.

Bill set the gun down and stood over his son, and after some time he spoke. "Nobody's going to find out about this," he said. "We're going to tell them I killed him because he's retarded."

"They're not gonna believe that!"

He turned to her and could see her white with revulsion just inside the screen door. "We'll tell them anyway. I killed him because he couldn't hold a job and I was disappointed in him."

"Alright," she said.

"He didn't do anything wrong, and you will take that to your grave. We both will." "Okay."

Bill looked down at him. "He was a good boy," he said, "and I loved him."

As the sirens approached and as the helicopter continued to circle, Bill walked around side of the house stepping carefully over the garden hose and got a drop cloth out of the garage he could use to cover their son.

It was hot out there, and as he came back around he had enough sense to look in at the thermometer, big as a butcher's scale, that was hanging from a nail on the screen porch.

It was eighty-seven degrees. A scorcher. A real hot one.

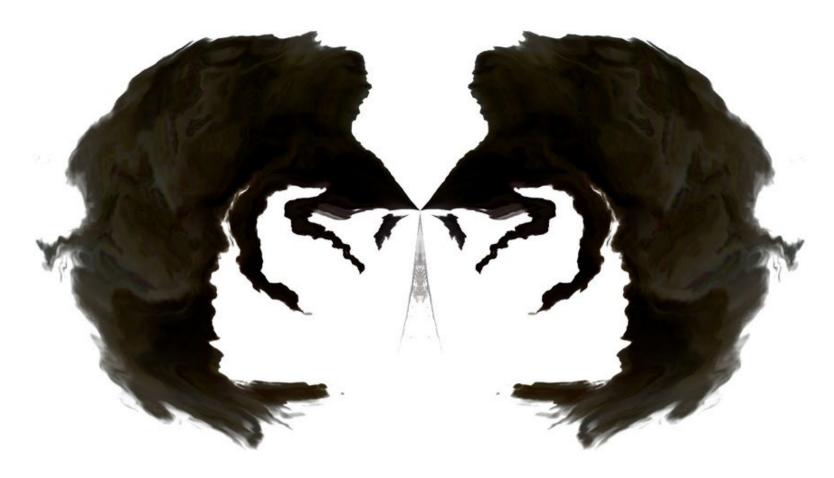
The End.



Aaron Martz

Aaron Martz was born in Fort Wayne, Indiana, educated at Millikin University and Columbia College, Chicago, and lives in Los Angeles, California where he works in the film industry. He has finished two novels and is at work on his third, all in the crime genre. He hopes to have them published in the coming year.

# She James Park Physician: Dr. Edgar 9828-SJE41



CASE #48398

#### She By James Park

THERE'S A WHOLE LIST OF THINGS THAT I'd rather be doing. Really, there is. But please don't mistake this disclosure for a sign of snobbery. I'm not a prude. Not in the least. In fact, through the eyes of this abandoned generation that's never heard of Frank Sinatra, and possesses only mutilated knowledge of Jerry Lee Lewis, my list is actually quite impressive.

Take my sock drawer, for example; it hasn't been rearranged since the last full moon. The shirts hanging in my closet are organized by color, though I've been tempted to reposition them by fabric, you know, put all of the cottons on the left, and the polyesters on the right, with garments of varying quality in between. It's pragmatic, that's all. Besides, it will allow me to move on to other tasks that need attention, like cleaning the excess lint from my bellybutton. That, and my toe nails could use a good clipping. The last woman I slept with complained about scratches on her calves, but if you could see the marks she left all over my back, you'd agree that my reaction was quite fair.

There's also an endless supply of muck that needs scraped from the ventilation system, and my landlord refuses to do anything about it. He'll regret this, most certainly, but I'm not going to add his chore to my list. A man needs to have priorities, and I do. The top-heavy blonde occupying the adjoining townhouse hasn't been peeped on in a while, and that constitutes a much better use of my time.

But I can't even perv on her right now, for the ways of our world won't have it. Good manners and kind etiquette dictate that I make an appearance. So here I am, I'm at the party. I'm showing my face. And I'll be frank about it; the other guests are atrocious. They're guilty of bad taste, poor hygiene. Worst of all, they make me feel old. And they do so in a manner that's comparably offensive to how the human body reminds people that years are perpetually slipping away.

You see, I've been here before—many times—and I've done this before. There's nothing new here for me, and to say that this scene has grown old would be a grave understatement. These people believe that they've entered adulthood, and they don't even realize that they're final shreds of youth are slipping away. There's no acknowledgment, no redemption. The clouds

of marijuana smoke might stink like skunk, in a really esoteric sort of way, but I'm just not impressed. It smells juvenile to a man of my experience. I find it tacky. And to top things off, they're drinking forty-ouncers. That's right, I said it: forty-ouncers. The fridge is full of Old English 800 and King Cobra. A few people are sipping on Mickey's. And it wouldn't surprise me to find some empties of Little Kings lying about. That's the kind of party I'm at.

Does no one here drink wine? Or eat chicken that hasn't been deep fried? Do they know nothing of food that isn't delivered in a cardboard box?

These people have reached legal age, for the most part, but they have yet to grasp the realization that their bodies are nothing more than prisons, that they've been sentenced to life inside the confines of their own flesh and blood. Everything is permanent. If they understood the eternity of this statement, they wouldn't desecrate their insides with mutinous toxins. But they do.

Most of them will live long enough to fully comprehend the notion of regret. The drinking and smoking is one thing, and the binging and purging on shitty food is another. But I'm a gambling man, and I'm willing to bet that most will eventually lament the strange and bizarre modifications that they make to their own flesh. They ink themselves up because tattoos look good at heavy metal shows, gives them some flare at parties. But have they given any thought to an occupation, how they'll secure gainful employment as the manifestation of adulthood becomes impossible to ignore?

Take that chubby guy standing in the corner talking to those two pencil-legged blondes. I mean seriously, you can overlook the fact that he's sleeved, but who's going to make a job offer to someone with Captain Caveman painted on one side of his neck, and Ren Höek on the other? I suppose he can collect garbage, and certain artery-clogging deathtraps might let him wait tables. His other options are pretty much limited to bouncing at the titty bar, or selling his goo to sperm banks with low standards.

But again, don't mistake me for a prude, because I'm not. It's just that I have a philosophy on tattoos, and if you'll hear me out I think you'll agree that my philosophy makes perfect sense. The ink these people wear is not a right of passage. It's just not. And if they'd exercise a little discretion, the pictures and patterns that desecrate their flesh might hold a bit more meaning. You see, I don't have a problem with a few discerning tattoos. This is normal, especially when one has suffered from the plagues of youthful angst. Go ahead, get something on your back, your stomach, maybe your chest. But make sure it's something that you'll cherish until it's time to crawl inside your coffin. I have a tattoo of Lucy Westenra taking a big old bite out of Dr Abraham Van Helsing's neck, and I have no recollection of why I ever wanted this atrocity on my back. But I can live with it. Really, I can.

Other people have ink all over their knuckles, up and down their arms, across the front of their neck, and that's a completely different story. In my humble opinion, you have to earn that kind of desecration. If you're a musician with high aspirations, I hate to break it to you, but you should concentrate on hitting it big first. But if you front a death metal outfit and have the likes of Cannibal Corpse and Napalm Death kicking each other in the nads over who gets to share a stage with you, then beyond doubt you deserve it. Really, that's how these things should work. All you creative geniuses that sleep on mattresses stuffed with Ben Franklins, go ahead, tat your faces like those freaks from the Jim Rose Circus. But when the nameless nobody's that stand in line for concerts get covered in ink, without any regard for how they'll survive until their coffins inevitably clamp shut, it's not a sign of status; it's a sign of stupidity.

Self desecration might not be a new phenomenon, but I'm still going to be blunt about it. In this day and age of progressive social suicide, it's not even about the tattoos anymore, now is it? Of course not. It's not even about the nose rings or the tongue rings. And it's not about the eyebrow piercings either. The young can no longer impress each other with these token accessories. There's no permanent modification involved, it's all removable. The remaining scars, if any, are faint, and they grow even fainter as the years wash away. These days it's all about ear gauging, you know, stretching your lobe around a hollow plug. The small gauges might grow back, but there are plenty of people walking around this party with earlobes stretched around some big ass plugs; they've given themselves no choice but to wear these ridiculous things to the grave. And I consider this spectacle to be the biggest atrocity of them all. It's just downright sickening. So why, might you ask, am I still here? Why am I sitting on this musty old couch while the dregs of society pass around refer and chug forty-ouncers? It's quite simple, really. I'm acquainted

with the host. Call me old fashioned, but I have the decency to exercise good manners. He invited me, so I came, and now I've shown my face. I've said hello to the few people that deserve my hellos. And I've stayed for the obligatory forty-five minutes that any decent guest would stay. But alas, it's time to think about leaving, for I have a whole list of things that I'd rather be doing.

And then she walks in.

That's right, I said it: she.

I don't really know who she is, but I've seen her before, and the memories won't soon be washed away. She's an angel here on earth, and she'll be an angel when she dies. It was at Mushroomhead when she first caught my eye. I just assumed she was part of the cult, you know, a blue collar gal that lives on the outskirts of Cleveland and only leaves home to watch her men in evil masks scream vehemently into microphones, pound violently against water drums. You don't see too many beauties at these shows, especially not of her caliber. She's like a precious little flower growing from toxic dirt alongside the weeds of an overlooked subculture. My heart ached for her attention, like I'd been stabbed. It happened all over again in Cincinnati. She made it to that Anthrax show, you know, the crazy one when they shared the stage with Exodus. And then she started popping up around Columbus, watching Obituary play the Alrosa Villa, catching Slayer at the LC. I even saw her at the Newport Music Hall when Carcass came through town with the Black Dahlia Murder. It got to the point where I could feel her presence before I even saw her. Whenever we stepped foot in the same concert hall it felt like my heart had been mummified in barbed wire, and I had no choice but to bleed for her. I'll happily make that kind of sacrifice again. But you can't just approach strange girls and offer them your blood. Not at these places, at least. Women don't just hang out a metal shows by themselves, unless they're trying to fuck the band.

This little angel attends shows with a rotating cast of Neanderthals. You've seen them before, the big burly type that you shouldn't mess with, but when it comes down to it, they're no smarter than that Frankenstein creation they call Rocky Horror.

Every time I see her with one of those beasts it's like she's talking to me, like she wants to tap me on the shoulder and plead with me to save her from an endless eternity of dating these blubbering idiots.

She'll be better off when it happens, you know. I'll take her someplace posh, where we can lock arms and sip merlot, nibble fettuccine from each other's forks. The day I seize the right to lick caviar from her soft white neck will be a glorious day indeed. But what this angel really wants is for someone to make a genuine effort, to curl up inside her mind and explore the vastness of her true self. She needs this much more than she needs a bloated imbecile who extracts a sense of self-worth from out-drinking his buddies and starting fights in the mosh pit.

So why am I so nervous? She walked through the door by herself, null and void of the barbaric slabs of lard that can't keep their hands off her ass.

There are all kinds of reasons why I shouldn't be nervous; the fact that I'm more sophisticated than her senseless prototypes sits graceful at the top of my list. I'm older than her, though not in a creepy way, but in an experienced way. Women like that. They love a man who's had time to perfect the art of approaching women. And I've had that time. So why are my palms sweaty? Why is my pulse beating me senseless from the inside? Why is the barbed wire digging deeper into my heart? I'll tell you why. It's called supply and demand. There's only one flower growing amongst the weeds, and if I'm not careful someone else might pluck her from the rotting earth and preserve her prettiness in a vase that's free of scum and decay. I don't ever want to go searching for another flower amongst the rubbish. I want to this one. Just give me an opportunity, and I'll open doors for her, pull out chairs for her, even roll around naked in her silky black hair.

She's perfect in every way imaginable, a rare spec of purity in this static age of toxic cocktails and microwavable carcinogens. And when you're gifted with this magnitude of beauty, well then, you've earned the right to sleeve your arms with all the ink you can afford. I think her tattoos are quite smashing, really. The Misfit's skull on her left shoulder holds a certain elegance. As does the image of Chaly positioned directly beneath, with boney wings outstretched, skeletal mouth agape to display his sharpened fangs. I even admire the image along her forearm: Vic Rattlehead painted in all his glory, with black visor shielding the eyes, metal caps covering the

ears, and iron staples clamped over the mouth. Her right arm holds the image of Eddie the Head, surrounded by ivy that twists around flowers and cartoon-like slugs. She makes the ink beautiful. It's the canvas that defines the painting.

So there, that's why I'm nervous. It's all I can do to fight away the tension, keep it hidden in the dark chambers of my mind where she won't find it until we've grown comfortable together.

Her stained skin is soft to the touch. I can tell this much just by pressing my index finger against her bare shoulder, though I'm sure every inch of her exudes similar softness.

As she turns around, her thin eyebrows arch inquisitively. I extend a hand and say, "Edmond Kensington."

She drops her chin, allows her big brown eyes to stare at my open palm, and then just gazes at me, shrugging her shoulders.

"You look familiar," I say. "It's possible we've met before, maybe have some friends in common." "Look," she says. "I'm just the girl that lives next door. I think my roommate might have wandered in here, that's all."

And then she turns and walks away.

The barbed wire wraps tighter around my heart as my eyes glue themselves to her ass. It's perfect, just like the pain. She casually grips a strand of the barbed wire and wraps it about her hand, ripping the soul from my heart as she disappears into the next room. It leaves behind a bloody trail, and I don't think I'll ever again be able to love anyone but her.

Really, that's all the encouragement I need. She walked off with my bloodied soul, and left a trail for all to see. So it's official. She's my angel. I have no choice but to love her more than she'll like. There aren't words bold enough to articulate the passions that I'll engage her in. But for now, it's time to leave. If she hadn't shown her gorgeous face I'd be gone already. My heart wouldn't be torn with the lacerations of barbed wire, and my soul wouldn't be left palpitating on the floor.

There's really no reason to go home and peep on my top-heavy neighbor. The object of my desire lives right next door. She told me so herself. And a man of my intelligence has no trouble reading between the lines. So I'll be patient.

Fresh air feels like a cleansing, washing all but the faintest residue of marijuana smoke from my clothes and my hair. I'm in a rather quaint part of town. You can smell coffee beans roasting at nearby cafes, food simmering at local bistros. The apartment next door is numbered 138, and all the lights are off. No telling where her roommate ran off to, or which of the two will return first. It doesn't matter. I'm going inside, and I'm going to wait. Picking locks is just one of many skills that I've acquired throughout the years, and I'm not bashful about putting it to use.

It doesn't take long to determine which bedroom belongs to my little angel. It's the one with black t-shirts and cutoff jeans all over the floor.

Is it wrong of me to notice her dirty underwear thrown about, or the clean ones folded neatly inside the top drawer? I've told you already that I'm not a prude. Besides, we're soon to be lovers, share body fluids, and engage in the type of intimacies that solidify relationships.

I think it's absolutely adorable, really. Beneath her cutoff jeans she wears the tiniest black thongs, and hiding beneath her sleeveless Sepultura shirts are lacey black bras. Is it strange to pluck these items from her floor, to admire them, smell them, rub them all over my face? We've already begun to make one another's acquaintance. She's been following me to shows all over the state, with those big burly nincompoops serving no other purpose than to communicate that her standards should be raised. So no, it's not strange. It feels so right. And I think I'll take the opportunity to sniff about the rest of the apartment.

Flowers on the windowsills. William Burroughs novels by the sofa. A copy of Blue Velvet resting beside the DVD player. Pictures of male nudes all over the walls. It's all so very comfy.

I wonder who plays the piano. Perhaps it's just for decoration. It makes little difference, really. I'm much more interested in what she keeps in the kitchen. You can tell so much about a person based on what they eat. And my main concern is purity. Am I about to drink blood that's been tainted with the toxins of poor diet, or will I be sinking my fangs into a body that's green and chaste, as nature intended?

It's important for you to understand that immortality is more a curse than a blessing. Lost souls that tread water in purgatory have better destinies than me. The body is nothing more than a prison. Haven't I shared this with you already? We're all trapped inside these cells of flesh

and blood, and some of us will be serving longer sentences than others. It's quite unfortunate, but living indefinitely on the lifeblood of diseased mortals doesn't spare me from the reality of decay. I can't just go to market and nab a woman who's free of growth hormones and antibiotics, minimally processed and fed an all vegetarian diet. No, I'm burdened with the task of stalking my prey and observing their habits, for there's no other way to ascertain what swims in their blood

I have an affinity for beautiful women, young one's especially, but oftentimes it's the attractive ones that possess the filthiest insides. It's true. But the more I look around, the more I understand that my little angel is exactly that; an angel. She's the flower in the dirt that's been watered just right, while the surrounding weeds have bathed in the toxic rain of poisoned pesticides.

She has apples in the refrigerator, brown rice in the cupboard. The shelves are stocked with organic nutriment. Ghee in place of butter. Olive oil that's cold pressed. Canisters of loose leaf tea. Everything in here is so green, so vibrant, so free from the infected tinctures of laboratory-altered consumables. From the bottles of Aquafina to the plate of fresh oranges, I don't see an item in this kitchen that could spoil her blood. There's no Red Bull, no packaged products full of artificial shit.

She's pure I tell you, pure.

And it's from this purity that complications arise. My intentions are undoubtedly altered, for the heart that my little angel has so gracefully wrapped in barbed wire wants nothing more than to indoctrinate her, to pierce her soft flesh with my fangs, and take only a modest sip from her sanguine nectar. My heart truly yearns to bestow immortality upon her, trap her by my side, and share with her the sweet lifeblood that will forever mold us as one.

But it's not going to happen. Immortality is a curse, and I'm nothing more than a prisoner to the needs of my body. You can envy me all you want, but there are horrors that exist on the outside, ready to attack us when we least expect, and there are horrors that manifest on the inside, and our awareness of their presence never goes away. I'm the embodiment of both, and the toll it takes is no small sum. The body can only excrete so many toxins before impurity leads to illness.

Have you given any thought to what six-hundred years of consumptions does to the liver? Have you? And this is only one of many afflictions. If I'm cut, I scar. If I'm beaten, I feel pain. If I become disfigured, I carry the disfigurement for eternity?

I never get to lay my head down to rest. I never get closure. And I seldom find purity, at least not in the quantity I require—it's an impossible feat. That's why my little angel won't be chained to my side for all eternity. It saddens me indeed, but I don't need an extra set of veins to feed, not when clean nectar resides in this very apartment.

It doesn't matter if her sexuality deserves preservation, or if my love for her holds sympathy. She may have been a flower amongst the weeds when I met her, but she'll be a corpse amongst the living when I leave her. There's no other way. Only pure blood makes the plague inside my body spread slower. And only her presence makes the barbed wire dig deeper into my heart.

I felt it digging in when the front door squeaked open. The pain's grown worse with every step she's taken, and now that I'm listening to her footsteps skipping towards the kitchen, the hurt becomes unbearable. She's certainly got a hold over me, but it's all mind over matter. That's what I tell myself. I've been sentenced to a longer term inside my flesh than she has, and I need her blood more dearly than she'll ever understand.

It would be so much easier if she looked plain and unappealing, or wore the deformities of a malformed fetus. But she's perfect, and I'm reminded just how so as our eyes interlock.

Here she stands, completely nude, glimpses of her pale flesh peaking out from between her tattoos. The wings protruding from her back are outstretched in full glory, covered with white feathers that appear silkier than her strands of black hair. The halo floating above her heads gleams with an alluring brilliance, as does her nose ring, and the loop that's pierced through her eyebrow. A holy light casts over her, and I'm paralyzed by the vision.

It makes little difference that I can't muster a single word. She still has the barbed wire rapped around her hand, and the pitter patter of blood dripping from her palm makes me salivate. There's nothing I want more than to sink my fangs into her neck, suck my angel dry, and leave her perfect body here on earth so it can gracefully rot its way to nothingness.

I think she's knows this. There's something discerning about that smirk on her face. And

there's something liberating about the way she yanks on the strand of barbed wire. It tears my heart from the arteries, right out of my flesh and onto the floor. It's still beating, right in front of me—slow, blubbery beats that sound like hiccups; my nausea worsens at the site. I'd vomit blood if it wasn't all gushing out of my open wound. I can't even plug it up with my hands. They too are being wrapped in barbed wire, an extension of the same strand that she used to mummify my heart. She's tied both hands behind my back. I don't know how she does this, but now it's happening to my legs, starting with the ankles. The sharp strands of steel wrap their way up my shins, ripping into my flesh as they pass over my thighs and approach my midsection—it's not stopping.

My angel just stands there and smiles, biting one of her fingernails while my body becomes thoroughly mummified in barbed wire. Blood pours from every cut, and it burns, like she's rubbed salt all over the wounds. As my ability to move becomes strangulated, I feel a pain more excruciating than any hunger that's ever plagued me. There's no way to replenish the lifeblood that's gushing from my wounds, forming puddles on the floor, mixing with sweet drops that fall from her wire-wrapped hand.

My sentence is almost over. I can feel it. I'll soon lay my head down for rest. And as I stare at the gorgeous little angel standing in front of me, I'm not sure if I should thank her or if I should curse her. It makes little difference, for I love her, and I think she knows it.

The End.



James Park

Details not released at this time







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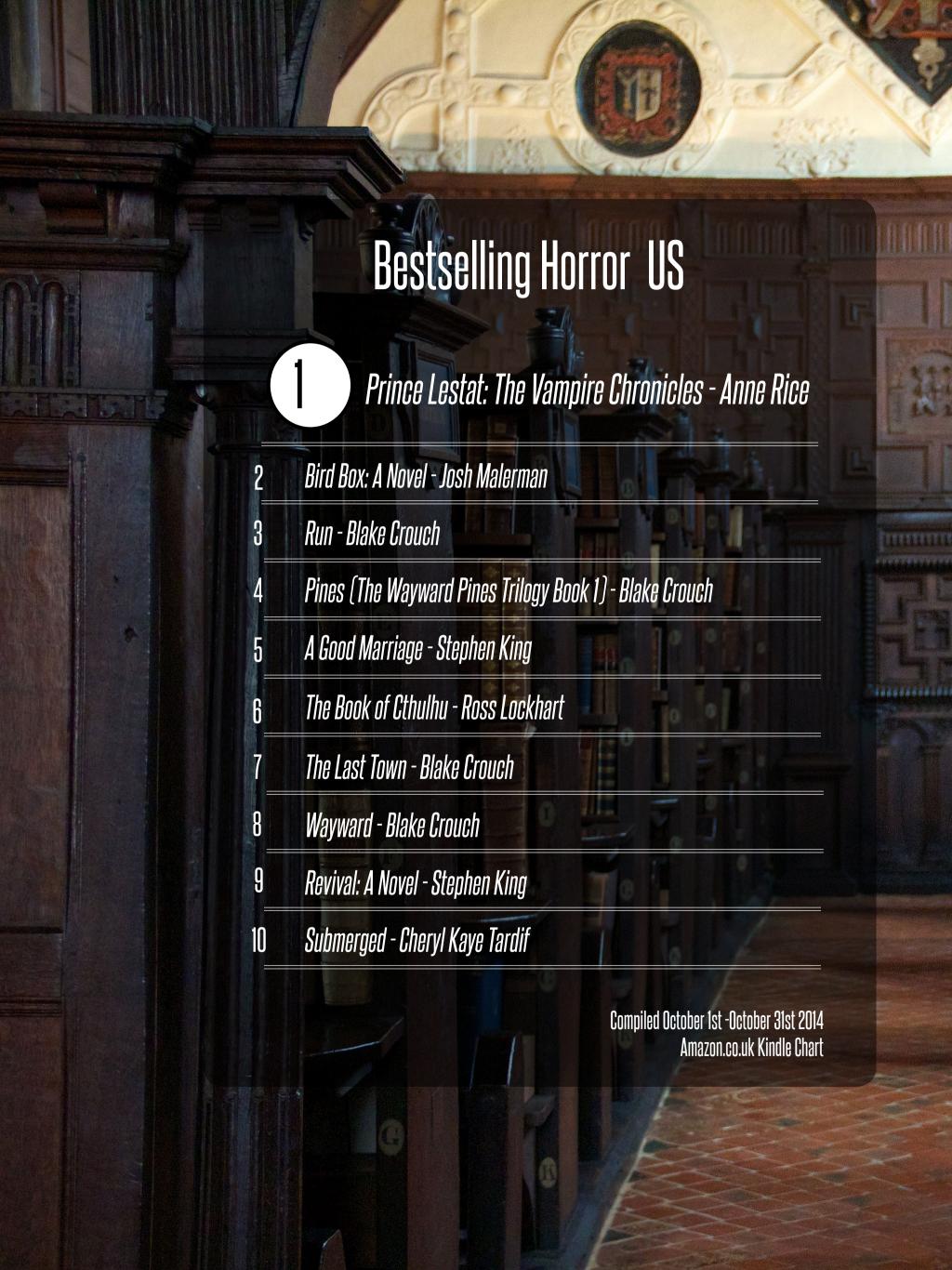
THE HOPE SPOT

This edition of the Hope Spot see R. Donald James Gauvreau delving into the topic of Re-skinning Werewolves



REVIEWS

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## STUCK ON YOU JASPER BARK - A REVIEW



Stuck On You is a collection of short stories and novellas by Jasper Bark.

Let's get this out of the way upfront: Yes, these are dark tales. In them, gruesome and grotesque things frequently happen to people. Some will make you question the limits of human endurance. Some will make you question what you had for lunch, or kill your appetite stone dead. My experience of extreme horror writing is fairly limited, but if there's stuff that's hugely more extreme than these tales, I'm certainly not in any hurry to read them.

However, there's something which for me is far, far more important than the darkness of these tales: namely, they are very, very good. Throughout this collection, Mr. Bark demonstrates a considerable level of ability to write in different voices, to tell vastly different tales. There are superlative first person narratives (Taking The Piss and Haunting The Past), tales from both sides of the Atlantic, one short story

(Mouthful) told, appropriately enough, entirely through dialogue, and even a trip back in time, albeit it to the weirdest Wild West I've ever encountered. Mr. Bark moves between these prose styles and voices effortlessly, with the skill of a true storyteller, selecting the most appropriate or interesting mode of delivery, and then just nailing it.

Both Taking The Piss and Haunting The Past are especially well done in this regard – each first person narratives but with such different lead voices it's hard to credit they come from the same mind. The foreword to the collection hints that the author may well have a theatrical background, which perhaps explains his uncanny ability to get inside the mind of a character. Haunting the Past is as inventive a ghost story as you'd expect from the title, with a delightful ending that evokes Lovecraft, and a surprising (and surprisingly deep) protagonist. Likewise, Taking The Piss is pretty much a master class in the short horror form - genuinely chilling, brutal yet fiercely intelligent, morally conflicted characters, and some exceptionally deft imagery callback - this story is on my shortlist for best short horror story of 2014. And yes, okay - I wish I'd written it. It's that good.

The novellas that bookend this collection are also both worthy of high praise. Stuck On You, the title piece, is a grotesquely delightful premise which Mr. Bark proceeds to mine for all it's worth, skilfully interweaving flashbacks into the narrative. This one evoked some of Stephen King's darker, more intimate survival horror pieces, though I doubt even he'd have picked quite so extreme a premise – and praise from me doesn't come much higher than that.

Dead Scalp, the aforementioned Weird West tale, closes out the collection in

fine form. It's a jet black Western, with a set-up designed to exploit the tough, even hellish nature of life on the frontier, where violence is the only real law. However, the supernatural elements move the story way beyond that initial premise, to territories far darker, more gruesome, and ultimately deeper and more thoughtful.

So yes, Stuck On You is gross out horror, and yes, a strong stomach is required. But make no mistake, this is also deeply intelligent, skilfully written, intense and often angry horror, written by a storyteller of considerable skill, imagination, and talent. Stuck On You is old school good, and Jasper Bark is one to keep a very close eye on.

#### REVIEWED BY KIT POWER

Read more reviews and horror news at Ginernutsofhorror.co.uk

#### About Kit Power

Kit Power lives in Milton Keynes, England, and insists he's fine with that. His short fiction has been published by Burnt Offering Books and MonkeyKettle Books. A trio of thematically linked novella length tales 'The Loving Husband and the Faithful Wife' (plus short story 'The Debt') and 'Lifeline' are available in two volumes via Amazon now. His debut novel (currently called 'The God Issue', but that will hopefully change) is due out in Autumn 2014.

To stay up to date, check out his <u>Amazon</u> author page: Those of you who enjoy near-professional levels of prevarication are invited to peruse his blog at http://kitpowerwriter.blogspot.co.uk/



#### THE HOPE SPOT

## Re-skinning Werewolves By R. Donald James Gauvreau

"Omnes angeli, boni et Mali, ex virtute naturali habent potestatem transmutandi corpora nostra." All angels, good and bad, have the power of transmuting our bodies.

- Thomas Aquinas

A few months ago we began a discussion about vampires. Not as they are today but as they were in folklore. Today I'd like to do the same with werewolves, and again see what we can come up with by drawing on these basic components.

The werewolf myth is thought to have originated in Proto-Indo-European culture as a "class of young unwed warriors [that] were apparently associated with wolves. By the Middle Ages werewolves were generally associated with witchcraft and sorcery, an important thing to note because it meant that werewolves usually had magical powers in addition to shapeshifting.

Keep in mind, whatever else you do as you write, that wolves are scary. Spend a night in wolf country, why don't you, and then see how you like bumping into just a single wolf. Removed from the dark as we are, we find it easy to forget what it means that a wolf is a predator, but the first and most desperate lesson of any old folktale was this: The woods are bad. Do not enter the woods. Bad things happen there, and nobody gets out alive.

And the wolves are the embodiment of woods. So says Red Riding Hood.

#### The Curse

Cannibalism is a common theme in werewolf stories. Werewolves can be made by eating the meat of a wolf and a human together, or just a wolf's brains. Werewolves could be born with the curse if they were the seventh son of a seventh son (seventh daughters were born witches) or the first son born after a line of six daughters. It could also happen if they were conceived under the new moon or born under the full moon. Born werewolves typically change their shape for the first time at age seven. The moon could have an effect in other ways. Sleeping under the full moon on a Wednesday or Friday (but

sometimes only in the summer) would convey the curse.

Drinking water that has been touched by a wolf, such as from a "lycanthropous stream," can do the trick (consider what would happen if one inhaled the water as a vapor).

Totems may be used, such as a wolf skin (either a cloak or a belt) that must be removed at daybreak and be hidden. Through the skin the werewolf may be controlled or killed. A magic salve may be rubbed onto the body, or a beer may be drunk, followed by reciting a magical formula. Passing through an arch of birch three times can do it, and ash can also be involved, in this or other contexts, in making a werewolf. Wrongdoing (such as killing a close family member or committing incest or necrophilia) could be responsible for the curse, which might make one return from the dead as a blood-drinking wolf. Other stories speak of women who committed certain sins and were visited by a spirit. Forced to wear to wear the wolfskin carried by the spirit, the woman will hunger for flesh, leading her to eat her own children, and then her relatives' children, and then the children of strangers, and all this for a period of seven years.

While it is well-known that pacts with the Devil may make one a werewolf, less known is that in some stories it was angering the Devil that would bring down the curse.

Abused children could become werewolves, which highlights a theme that is easy to find in many versions of the myth, both modern and ancient. The werewolf reflects the cycle of abuse, violently attacked and now later becoming an attacker, an abuser, as well. Perhaps by playing on this it is possible to lose the curse (maybe only if one never gave in, though), but incredibly hard. And the curse may always come back if things go badly.

#### **Shapeshifting**

Besides the usual trope of a werewolf changing shape, it may produce a double or project its soul in order to possess a wolf. The "wolf" may also be a familiar spirit that serves and is directed by the human. In cases of remote direction injuries to the wolf may be reflected in the condition of the werewolf.



After returning to human form the werewolf may be weak and debilitated and suffer from nervous depression.

Double or projected soul. Real animal or familiar spirit, in which case injuries to it may be reflected in injuries to the human. After returning to human form may be weak and debilitated with nervous depression.

#### Other Powers

The child-eating werewolf spoken of earlier has doors and locks spring open at its approach, making no path shut off to it. Some werewolves were thought to descend to the depths of Hell and there do battle with the Devil and his servants. Werewolves could easily be able to travel to another world, too.

Some werewolves had poison-coated claws and a paralytic gaze, which might only work on animals and children. According to the Greeks, a werewolf that was not destroyed in the proper fashion would return as a wolf or hyena to prowl battlefields and eat the dead and dying (perhaps these can become something worse if not dealt with?).

Navajo skinwalkers, which share many underlying tropes with European werewolves, have a number of interesting powers. They can steal faces, read thoughts, enter your body by looking in your eyes, and mimic sounds. Through magical items, which are usually made from bones (especially infant bones) or snakes, they can cause fear, paralysis, and heart failure, and control people. They can feed off fear.

#### Countermeasures

First off, children cursed to become werewolves may be given a name like "Blessed" in order to cure them (which makes one wonder if the curse would take effect or return if one's name were changed later). Werewolves can also be cursed by being struck on the forehead or scalp three times with a knife, being addressed by their Christian names three times, or having their hands pierced with nails.

According to one lengthy account the proper method of disposing of a werewolf is to decapitate it with a spade, exorcise the body, and then throw the head into a stream. Werewolves often share other traits (especially methods of disposal) with vampires, up to and including an inability to enter a home without being invited.

#### **Tells**

At first glance, werewolves may have unibrows, curved fingernails, widow's peaks, low-set ears, or glowing eyes. With closer inspection one may find bristles under the tongue or overly stiff movements, and one who cuts a werewolf will find fur in the wound no matter the circumstances.

The animal form may be larger than normal, have no tail, and/or have human eyes and a human voice.

Those that are born werewolves may be identifiable as having been born with hair or a caul, or a certain birthmark (sometimes any birthmark at all). Sometimes the only thing that can mark a werewolf is its personality, whether it has become outright murderous, merely predatory, or simply possessed of a few new quirks, such a need for spooky meetings in the dead of winter. Other interesting quirks include attempts to get parents to give up their children, an obsession with spreading their condition, or a deep-rooted compulsion to eat corpses. Epilepsy sufferers may be identified as werewolves (do werewolves have epilepsy as a rule).

In Practice: The Evening Men

Spirits are the source of all power in the world. Wretched and alien, old enough to remember different ways in the land and different constellations in the sky. Perhaps they were always as they are now, or perhaps they are the eldritch vestige of a much earlier civilization. Regardless of how the spirits got their power, magic today depends on the spirits, who may warp the world and grant gifts both intentionally and as a mere side effect of their existence. The Evening Men are those that have successfully entreated a spirit to remove their souls. Under the darkness of the new moon a called spirit flays its petitioner and takes his soul with it, the two inexorably bound in the form of a wolf skin. The process is excruciating, sometimes even deadly.

In theory, the process should confer immortality. However, a soul that has been once removed from its tabernacle of flesh will not last very long, and such a soul that has been given physical form is only slightly better off. Moreover, a soulless body will soon begin to rot. Without further intervention, the soulflaying is but a recipe for an early and agonized death.

In order to refresh their bodies the Evening Men don their wolfskins for a few hours each night. And sometimes as they do this they project their minds into the body of a wolf and go hunting. The object is not merely to kill their victim but to inspire fear all along the way. The body is flooded with chemicals which, once properly "catalyzed" by a violent death, are capable of giving nourishment to the wolfskin soul in some as-yet undiscovered process. Depending on how successful an Evening Man is in triggering these chemicals one may need to hunt every night or once a month. But in the daylight the wolfskin crumbles, and so they must put it away somewhere dark and safe until the night comes again. If the wolfskin fades in daylight or is burned then the Evening Man will be left with no way to stave off future decay, until finally there is nothing left but immobile, yet still eternally aware, bones. Should the body

be made unviable without the wolfskin being destroyed, however, then the Evening Man's consciousness can jump to possess someone of weak will, perhaps a small child or a lunatic, and the process will start all over again. Evening Men can be physically identified by the scars left from their flaying, and should they relocate to a new body their original scars will reappear the first time that they don the wolfskin again. It takes time for skin to grow back too, which makes them even more obvious in the early days.

R. Donald James Gauvreau maintains a blog at www.whitemarbleblock.blogspot.com, where he regularly posts story ideas, free fiction, and other goodies, including a free guide to comparative mythology that was written specifically with worldbuilding in mind.

He is probably not a spider.





# The Hangman

Niko Hart

Physician: Dr. Peterson 8268-WCT29



CASE #28062

### The Hangman By Niko Hart

DETECTIVE BILL HARDY DROPPED HIS CIGARETTE in the soda can on his desk. It hissed and he sighed. Another one dead. Third strangulation in two weeks, enough for the media to credit it to a serial killer. And why not? These things had to happen somewhere.

"Why not?" said Bill's lifelong friend Ray Roberts into the telephone. "Because this is a damn small town full of good people. Hell Bill, if it ain't work or church, they're out on the river or watching football."

"Or getting strangled," Bill said indifferently as the clock neared midnight.

"How is Barbara?" Ray said.

"At this hour? Asleep probably. I felt like a real prick, had to cancel dinner on her tonight, but she—"

"—sounded okay with it? They always sound okay until they ain't. Take it from me, go home while you still got a wife. If just one psycho is really doing all this, he won't last long."

Bill shouldered his cellphone and pinched a mound of files between his armpit. "Oh yeah, and why is that?" He closed his office door, waved goodbye to the secretary Jodi, and walked out of the police station.

Ray was eating something, nachos most likely. He chewed and swallowed before answering. "Sold clean out of .9mm ammo today and down to my last boxes of .45 caliber. Plus the 12 gauge shells are flying off the shelf. If you don't catch this guy, the town militia will."

"Just what this town needs," Bill said, well past tired, "more bloodlust."

Ray snorted and began a defense of the Second Amendment. Bill tried hard not to ignore him as he squinted down the dark street. By day, the historic area of Main Street, Placerville was a hotspot for tourists, a quaint avenue of cafes and antique shops that mostly closed up by 5pm. Because the streets emptied soon after, city council never saw a reason for streetlights.

"Hey Roy, I appreciate the marriage advice. At least I got you to keep me company on late nights if things go sour with Barb and me."

"The hell you do!"

Bill dug for his flashlight. "Alright pal, it's dark as death out here and I need my hands."

"Fair enough," Roy said, "I got another call anyway."

"Sure you do," Bill said as the line went dead.

Bill lit up the sidewalk and rested his hand on the butt of his .44 special as he walked to his truck. Deep winter chill brought the late-night quiet of a graveyard and Bill could feel the Hangman's eyes on him like a spotlight.

Bill pulled into his driveway and cut the headlights of his Dodge the way he'd done a hundred times before. This time the living room of his two-story colonial home was on. He felt grateful knowing he had a sympathetic ear waiting. The ramblings of old ex-drinking buddies only helped so much.

Barbara sat on the loveseat with a glass of wine, her legs curled beneath her. She switched off the TV and watched her fingernails as he walked in. Even at forty-eight she was every bit as stunning as the day he invited her to a rodeo their first week of college at UC Davis.

"Hey honey. It sure is good to come home to some lights for a change."

"Well, try getting home early for a change and it might be different," she said with a smile. Even after so many years, she believed in the work he did. He couldn't love her more for it.

"Another one dead," he said. "Killed with an old rope, again."

"My God. How are you holding up?"

He kissed her check and sat down, his bones aching. "I miss you. My life revolves around the actions of criminals." He took her hand and squeezed. "Maybe it's quitting time Barb, just as soon—"

"—soon as this case is over?" Barbara said. "If I had a dollar every time I heard that one, I could retire." Her smile was not as triumphant as usual.

"So what's the bad news?" he said.

"Cancer is back."

"Jesus," he muttered.

"So I'm getting out of your hair—no, sit back down—to my sister's place. She insisted."

"Florida," he croaked. "Until when?"

She sipped her wine and smile wryly. "Just until your case is over."

Bill made a tortured gurgling sound and slumped into the couch. "Guess I deserve that. At least the sun out there will do you good. It's only getting colder here."

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Next day, Bill fought the liquor demon as public hysteria mounted. After kissing Barbara goodbye at the airport terminal, he could taste the wine on her lips for hours. With the stress, the media calls, and the fear in his community, his willpower slipped inches at a time. Then he saw the newspaper headline and cracked.

"Kettle One double and a glass of water," Bill told the bartender. He unfolded this morning's Mountain Democrat and reread the headline:

Hangtown Strangler Strikes Again

Are local police choking?

He scanned the article. No leads, no witnesses, no nothing. The first item bothered him most. He had plenty of leads: alcoholic husbands, greedy business partners, a mailman with a history of assault. He had leads all right, all leading to nowhere. To say otherwise was just bad reporting. It stunk of the new police station intern Jonathan Reeds.

Bill left the Hangman's Saloon feeling better than he had in a while. Main Street was nearly empty. Leave it to late-afternoon cold and three murders to keep the visitors away.

Rope flexed above him. He looked up at the scuffed soles of the swaying figure. It hung from the third story roof by a noose around its neck. The local curiosity, a sun-tanned mannequin dressed in the gruff fashion of a 1850s gold miner. The area was famous for kicking off the California gold rush, and the Hangman was tribute to the unruly times.

"Afternoon Hangman," Bill muttered. "If we don't find this guy soon I might be up there keeping you company."

He blew hot breath into his cupped hands and walked up the street to the police station. He felt light on his feet and thankful for the emotional distance that comes with a few drinks. Inside

the station, he found Jonathan Reeds leaning over the front desk, chatting up the secretary and sipping coffee like he owned the place. Bill couldn't resist nudging him with a shoulder as he passed.

Jonathan turned around with fire in his eyes. Bill gave him a bored glace and said, "Hey Jodi, when you find the idiot who leaked to the Democrat, let him know I'd like a word."

"Will do Bill," she said with a smile.

Bill closed his office door and muttered, "Bastard son of a judge," before fishing out an ancient bottle of Red Stag whiskey from his desk drawer. He knew the intern kid was trouble from day one; giving a journalism college student free reign inside a police station. No good could come of it

He took a pull from the bottle an instant before Jonathan walked into his office. Bill stashed the whiskey below his desk and glared at the boy.

"We knock around here," Bill said.

"How quaint. Looks like we've got a serial killer huh?"

"Call the press," Bill said dryly.

Jonathan looked at a photograph of Bill as a young man and police academy graduate. It was in black and white. "SWAT is out doing sweeps and backup units are showing up from three counties. And you know everybody's sure to keep their guns close and cocked."

"Do you have a point in there somewhere," Bill said.

Jonathan smiled. "Everyone knows you like to keep late hours here working and all," his eyes flicked to Bill's desk, "so I'd be careful walking around after midnight. In scary times people shoot at shadows."

"Get your skinny ass out of my office. Go do some homework."

Jonathan winked and gently closed the door. Bill shook his head, grinding his teeth as the room took a bit longer than usual to come into focus; he had the whiskey tolerance of a middle-schooler at the moment. It felt like a good time for a quick nap. He rested his head on his forearms, confident that Jodi would wake him if anything important happened.

Bill woke suddenly. The clock read five past midnight and his neck screamed with cramp. His tidy office was dark and quiet, so why had he come to with such violence? He dug his knuckle into his neck and turned for a look outside. Pale moonlight illuminated the ally outside his window. He caught sight of a dark figure stiffly lumbering down the alleyway. It vanished around a corner as a scream ripped the silence.

Distant sirens wailed and as Bill approached a dimly lit Mexican restaurant. A man wept beside a silver Range Rover, sputtering over the bodies of two teenage girls. Not ten feet away, a security guard lay on the asphalt beside a .357 magnum revolver.

Bill was the first on the scene. He loaded the distraught man, the father, into an ambulance and then searched for a witness, any witness. There was none. The busboy had found the girls following a sharp bang outside, a car backfiring or a gunshot maybe.

Bill finished grilling the kid and stood thinking, when a hand came down on his shoulder. He found Jonathan, flushed and wide-eyed.

"God..." It was all the boy could say for a moment, then, "Did anyone see anything?"

"Not a damn thing Johnny. A family reunion ran late inside the restaurant. The girls, sisters, went out to dad's car for a cellphone charger and must have bumped into our psycho. Thirteen and fifteen, just kids, ran down their phone batteries texting and what not, and walk into this hell. And then there's him." Bill motioned to the dead security guard.

Jonathan was silent for a moment. "The news mentioned a gold rush exhibit starting at the museum," he nodded toward the ivy-covered brick building across the street. "Probably hired him to keep watch."

Bill nodded. "Good thinking."

"I have my moments," Jonathan said.

By now, police cars lined both sides of the street. The flashing red and blue light lights gave the parking lot an unreal feel as Bill waited for the patrol officers to finish with the halogen lights.

With the crime scene flooded in hyper-white, Bill pulled on a chalky pair of latex gloves and looked sideways at Jonathan. The boy did a poor job of hiding his envy as he snuck glances at the bodies.

"So I'll go deal with bystanders and the press while you get to it then."

Bill felt like yelling bullshit! He met Jonathan's eyes and gave him an empty smile. "If you'd rather play bouncer or newsman then go for it, but if you're after a gold shield then I'd stick around and see if you can help solve this mess."

The two men walked shoulder to shoulder to the dead girls. They lay three feet apart, all faded jeans and furry Ugg boots. The older sister wore a pink Union Mine sweatshirt.

Bill let Jonathan absorb the sight and then asked, "What do you see?"

"I—I don't know. They don't seem to have struggled much, and the light inside the parent's SUV is still on."

"Squat down Johnny, get close. Every body tells a story, you need to learn to read it."

Jonathan was awkward at first, respectful even, as he knelt down and blew the hair from the younger girl's neck. He did the same to the second girl and then rechecked the first. He stood and exhaled.

"Well?" Bill said to Jonathan, disappointed that the boy had not vomited.

"The marks on their necks are different from the other strangulations, thinner. But look, one is deeper than the other."

Bill squatted down. Yes, the wounds from the crime scene photos showed an angry, inch-wide stripe around each victim's neck, a course rope forensics had said. In this case, both girls had a thin, almost elegant line crossing over their windpipe, though the older girl's ligature mark was a more inflamed shade of purple.

Bill stood. "Check the cigarette lighter."

Jonathan leaned into the car and checked the dashboard. He came out with a confused look on his face that suddenly grew into a wide smile. "It's empty. You think the killer used the cell phone charger?"

"I do," Bill said. "And I think the older sister has more pronounced markings because she offered to go first. She hoped her sister would escape or be let go."

Jonathan looked thoughtful. "So what? He choked her harder because she went first?"

"Because he was full of steam," Bill said. "Welcome to job training. You up for the security guard?"

Jonathan swallowed and nodded.

"Looks like a different killer," he said, looking at the man's neck.

"Same killer different murder," Bill said, tracing his finger above thin purple lines crisscrossing the man's neck. Above, below, and over the marks, finger-shaped bruises spoke of violent throttling. "My guess, cord broke. Attacker used his hands. Help me flip him."

Jonathan squatted beside Bill and easily turned the body face-up. The man was about thirty-five, with thin blond hair and a bloody welt over his left eye. Sure enough, the frayed white phone charger was coiled in a pool of blood on the asphalt.

"What's the story?" Bill said. He watched as Jonathan scanned the body from head to boot, saying nothing for a full two minutes. He brought his eyes inches from the man's neck, sniffed the asphalt, and moved to the revolver.

"Can I?" he asked Bill. He waited for a nod before lifting the gun and opening the chamber. Beads of sweat stood out on his forehead as he dumped the bullets into his palm. Five live rounds and one spent.

Bill stood quietly, smiling to himself and waiting. The boy's approach was systematic, advanced even. "Well?" he said at last.

Jonathan wiped his forehead and looked at Bill with bright eyes. "The security guard surprised the attacker, but hesitated. God knows why, maybe he was just a good guy. He fired at point-blank range. The barrel has red synthetic fibers melted to it, which means he stuck it right in the attacker's chest. We are looking for a guy in a red shirt. Probably flannel."

Bill's face revealed nothing, though his mind spun like a whirlpool. He knew of no man who could take a magnum round to the torso, finish off a grown man barehanded, and then escape without a single witness or visible blood loss.

Jonathan went on. "The attacker boxed the guy's ears—look at the blood in his ear canals—and then smashed his head on the curb. He got behind him with the phone cord but it snapped, so he used his hands."

"Solid enough, but what says our killer is male. Where's your proof?"

Jonathan scoffed then noticed Bill was serious. "Well, it takes a lot of strength to throw a guy

around like that. And the strangulation was fast. The guard scuffed the sole of his boot once before his throat caved in."

He looked more grim than triumphant, this pleased Bill. It meant he had the makings of a skilled detective, and sooner than later.

"Okay Bill, the suspense is killing me. How about a grade?"

"You did better than most second-year detectives," Bill said. "Though I'd save the corpse-sniffing for the privacy of the coroner's office. It's just bad form in public Johnny."

Jonathan gave a solemn nod then got the joke and snorted. "So that's it then, we are finished here." It was not a question.

"No," Bill said. "You are giving answers but not asking questions."

"What should I be asking?"

Bill smiled. "That's the best question you've asked. For starters, why didn't our guy use his rope?"

"Like in the past three murders," Jonathan said.

"Right. Also, why is there an empty noose hanging above the Hangman's Saloon? Did our 49er go out for a midnight stroll? And he wears a red flannel shirt right?"

Bill left Jonathan gaping. He told the lead patrolmen to sweep outward from the kill point for blood trails or a bullet from the dead security guard's revolver. It was for form's sake only; he knew they would find nothing.

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Bill spent the night turning and sweating in a beer-hazed nightmare world. He dreamt of the Hangman dangling in the still of night, fingers twitching. He came alive all at once. Moving in a stiff angular way as he kicked and pulled himself onto the window ledge and slipped the noose off his neck. Lifeless white eyes surveyed the town as he coiled the rope around his elbow and palm. Around and around.

Bill woke at 3am. He climbed from bed and went to his second-story bedroom window. A layer of frost coated the vast open field and oak trees beyond. It shone like diamonds in the moonlight. A scene of beauty and desolation for Bill's eyes only. He slept deeply from that point until sunrise, when the pounding on his front door pulled him from bed.

He stumbled down the stars and flung open the door, meeting a cold breeze and Jonathan's idiotic smile.

"You look like a kid on Christmas, for Christ's sake. What it is?" Bill growled in his husky morning voice.

"The Hangman is back under his rope. C'mon, we need to check it for clues. I got you this so you'd move faster." He handed bill a tall cup of gas station coffee.

Bill took a sip. Black, the way he liked it. Maybe interns did serve a purpose.

Sure enough, above the Hangman's Saloon hung the Hangman, looking no better or worse for wear. Under the sharp morning light, the figure looked as unreal as any department store mannequin. Bill had to admit, it made an unlikely serial murderer.

Bill replied to a few muttered hellos from diehard barmen as he and Jonathan walked through the saloon and up two floors of stairs.

"Explain this," Jonathan said, leaning out the third story window to smooth the Hangman's red flannel shirt. His fingertips traced a quarter-sized hole above the left breast pocket.

Bill reached out and ran his finger around the hole. He felt hard crust where a gun muzzle had melted the fabric. Inside was dense undamaged plastic. "I'll be damned," he muttered, "a bullet hit this shirt, no question, but the whole shoulder would've been blown off if this dummy took the bullet."

Jonathan unbuttoned the shirt to reveal a pale unblemished torso. "Wow, it even has a farmer's tan, but not a mark on it. Figure our killer stole the dummy and wore his clothes during the murders?"

"Why Johnny? This isn't some TV crime show."

"Yeah, but maybe the killer watches them. Think about it, he could have worn the clothes to scare the victims into freezing up. Or maybe it's his villain angle, like the Joker or something. I'd be scared shitless if some old gold miner wanted to strangle me."

"Well Jesus, he'd better stop killing the witnesses if he wants his costume to get attention," Bill said.

Jonathan shrugged and pulled a Zippo from his pocket. "Theory number two." He flipped the lid open and held the thick yellow flame beneath the Hangman's chin.

"What the..." Bill said, as the Plexiglas shell took light and started dripping blue flame to the street below. "Nope, not indestructible. No way this guy took a bullet last night."

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Bill finished the sixth beer of a six-pack and tried Barbara on the phone. Busy. He dug into the paper bag for another beer and found empty plastic rings. He wished for a seven-pack and considered taking a nap, but picked up the phone and dialed Jonathan instead.

"Hey bud, detective Hardy. You joining us in the stakeout tonight?"

"Hell yes. I wouldn't miss it. Why, are you tucking in early tonight?"

Bill chuckled. "Quite the opposite. I'm headed to my pal's shop for some extra firepower..."

"I'll be there in eight minutes."

"Don't speed Johnny," Bill said.

Jonathan burst out laughing and hung up.

"Welcome to Buck Stop, Ray Roberts at your service."

"Hell of a place you got here," Jonathan said, taking in the large fire-bearded man standing behind a glass counter full of handguns.

"Thanks a lot buddy!" Roy said, clenching Jonathan's hand. "I got over five-hundred firearms to meet your needs. And if you don't see it, it's because it ain't legal, but don't mean we don't have it." He winked at Bill.

"Read my mind as usual Ray," Bill said.

"Staking out the Hangman Strangler?" Ray said.

"Right again," Bill said. "And the sonofabitch is a ghost. Got anything for ghosts?"

Roy's red face lit up. "Got to see a ghost before you can kill it. You need light for that. Still carrying that ugly old bulldog pistol?"

"Until it gives out on me."

Roy rubbed his beard thoughtfully. "Good thing bricks don't breakdown...be right back." He walked in back and returned with three boxes of ammunition. He slid one over the counter. ".44 special tracer ammo. Shoots green balls of flaming metal. Sure to mess up any bad guy's day, human or otherwise." He glanced at Jonathan. "Putting the kid on the shotgun?"

"Three's a charm. You should be playing cards."

Ray shook his head. "My ex-wife would disagree with you on that one. Anyway, the kid looks like the shotgun type. Walks like a cheetah. Wrestler?"

"Two time all American in high school," Jonathan said.

Roy slid two more boxes over the counter.

"First box is rifled slugs. You can hit a tennis ball at fifty yards with enough pow left to blow your guy to pieces. The other one is pyro-rounds. Light up your enemies with a hundred feet of white phosphorous fire. Real crowd pleaser."

"Dragon's breath," Jonathan said, reading the box. "Everybody loves a flamethrower," Ray said. He looked to Bill, "Mind if I join you fellas?"

"Sorry Ray, law enforcement only. And the kid since he's halfway to a gold shield already."

Rays face fell. "If you need backup give me a call. I'll be at home in my rocking chair with the old T-Rex."

"Your dog?" Jonathan asked.

"My AA-15 automatic shotgun."

"And you wonder why the ladies are not knocking down your door," Bill said.

Heavy grey clouds dulled the afternoon as Bill took the back roads home. He passed dry rolling hills and pastures dotted with cows and horses.

Jonathan laughed. "Those llamas have frozen breath around their heads."

"It's supposed to snow down to our elevation. Be sure to dress warm tonight and make sure you show up before the checkpoints close the roads. Nine o'clock."

"Will do. Can I take the shotgun?"

"As a loan, but this isn't the library. If you're late returning it I'll arrest you." Jonathan laughed and turned up the radio.

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Bill had a brandy to steady his nerves. He found his nerves only needed steadying when he was drinking. He emptied the bullets from his revolver and made a mental note to load it with Ray's tracers once he got out to his truck.

Heavy rain clouds snuffed out the moon as he walked into the backyard to rummage through his old boat. His hands found the icy metal box soon enough. He flipped down the clasps and removed a little plastic flair gun and two stubby shells. He placed everything in his jacket pocket and headed for downtown.

Two flashing patrol cars blocked the road into town. Two officers were busy checking a line of waiting cars as Bill rolled past. An officer glanced at his badge and waved him through. Bill couldn't help wondering what the men hoped to achieve by looking for a killer with no description, but he understood the dangers of feeling helpless as violent crime terrified your town.

He heard the choppy helicopter engine the same moment a bright white spotlight passed over his car. Bill parked at the far end of Main Street and greeted three officers trotting down the road on horseback. He clipped his gold badge on his jacket and made for a brightly lit café, the only thing still open at this hour.

Chatting patrolmen filled the place like church on Easter. Every chair, bar and wall space was occupied. And with good reason. The room was hot to the point of sweltering and the coffee was free.

"Just doing our part to help catch the psycho," said the bouncy server girl as a table of veteran officers made room for Bill.

Bill clapped Fat Simmons on the shoulder as he sat down. He ordered an espresso and checked his cell phone.

"Expecting someone?" Simmons said from behind a mound of biscotti wrappers.

"We got this new intern at the branch. Ex-wrestler, sharp as a razor. Has the makings of a damn good detective if he sticks with law enforcement. I invited him to see what we do."

Beside Simmons sat a tank of a woman with thick brunette hair and scowling pink cheeks. She gave Bill a disgusted look. "You're letting an intern take part in a manhunt? You got a crush on him or something?"

Bill glanced at her powerful breasts smashed beneath her bulletproof vest and decided to go easy on her. "He gets to stand outside the museum with a shotgun. Maybe drink a cappuccino and hear some puffed up war stories from Simmons here."

She looked unhappy at this. Maybe her vest just needed loosening.

"The way it should be," Simmons said. He had a swallow of his mocha and continued. "Good cops don't come from reading textbooks."

"Agreed," Bill said. "And this kid has potential. He read the triple-homicide last night like a textbook. Straight out of a Sherlock Holmes story."

"The big city will swallow him soon enough" the policewomen said. "No need for a brain like that out here."

"Except when Jack the Ripper comes to visit," Simmons said with a whipped-cream grin.

"Speaking of," the policewoman said, handing Bill a rugged little walkie-talkie from a half full cardboard box. "The department is using a secure frequency tonight."

"Only gals and guys with a badge," Simmons said.

"Thanks a lot," Bill said. "Keeping it off the public scanners then?"

"That's the goal," the policewoman said. "We prefer trained professionals on this only, for safety's sake."

"Linda here is a trained marksman in all service weapons. Black belt in karate too," Simmons said.

Bill stood up and dropped a \$10 on the table. "That doesn't surprise me a bit. All right officers, stay safe. I need some fresh air."

Snow fell as Bill's shoes crunched over the icy sidewalk. His watch read a quarter past eleven. He walked to the side of the old historical museum and sat down on a member-donated bench.

The slanting roof caught the thickening snowfall and gave him a clear view of the Hangman across the street.

Car engines revved to life all at once. Tires screeched and the falling snowflakes turned red and blue as patrol cars skid over the frozen road. Police on horseback cantered by a moment later.

Bill shrugged and rubbed his gloved hands together. He thought about flipping on the walkie-talkie, but only for curiosity's sake. He was not moving until midnight, unless the Hangman moved first.

He heard the crunching snow before he saw the shadow. It crossed the street at a jogging pace. The snowfall was close to a whiteout; he couldn't even be sure the Hangman was still at the end of his rope. He reached into his jacket and remembered the bullets to his revolver were on the floorboard of his truck.

"Easy Clint Eastwood, it's just the intern."

"Johnny. Shit!"

Jonathan sat down on the bench, gripping the shotgun between his knees. "What?" he said with a smirk. "Thought the killer wanted a piece of old Bill Hardy?" He wore jeans and a tight thermal shirt tucked into fitted leather gloves. He smelled like sweat and cologne.

"Idiot kid, good to see you're dressed for the cold."

Jonathan shrugged and jammed a wad of chewing tobacco in his cheek. "I planned for activity tonight. Looks like you have a different idea."

"I'm sticking around here for a bit longer. It's almost midnight, then I'm going for more coffee." Jonathan rubbed his chest absently and tried to squint across the street. "Been out here long?"

"Not too long. I'm surprised the roadblock let you in this late. Supposed to close off all entry and exit at eleven."

"You think they'd stick around after another strangulation?"

"Huh?" Bill said.

Jonathan chuckled and shook his head. "Up at the hospital. They found her like fifteen minutes ago. A nurse, finished off in the parking lot. Young girl and pretty. Not as peaceful looking as the sisters last night though."

Bill was suddenly very alert. "You were there?"

"Right after the first responders. I offered to help but they told me to fuck off."

While it had taken Bill years of hard work to hone his detection skills, instincts had come with the job. They had saved him on more than once, told him three years ago that he was a drink away from a divorce, and warned him now that something was very wrong.

"Did you follow the sirens?" Bill asked in a casual tone. He rubbed his hands together before slipping them into his jacket pockets.

"I heard about it the same way everybody else does. Police scanner. You think I don't own one?" It was a lie of course, but it only proved that Jonathan had sweet-talked some department secretary for one of the officer-only walkie-talkies.

Bill fumbled inside his jacket pocket, trying to load a round into the flair gun. "Hey Johnny I meant to ask you, how'd you know about the murders last night? The call went out on a private scanner."

It was bullshit. Anyone with a police scanner would have heard the news. But Jonathan's silence was enough to brand him as a prime suspect. Bill reached for his handcuffs when Jonathan's shotgun smashed into his jaw.

Everything went black as Bill collapsed. Jonathan stepped over him and raised the shotgun over his head like an ax. Bill pulled the flair gun from his jacket and fired before the shotgun could fracture his face. A hissing ball of fire burned through the crotch of Jonathan's jeans and bounced blazing down the street. He shrieked and slapped at the flames eating his pants.

Bill ran for cover before the kid decided to use the other end of the shotgun. As if on cue, the gun exploded.

Bill leapt behind a dumpster as a tube of fire roared by. He felt a sharp punch in his lower back. He reached back and felt a crispy hole in his jacket and burnt flesh beneath it. The pain was brutal but the wound was shallow. He'd be spitting up his kidney if Jonathon would've hit him with the rifled buckshot.

The shotgun boomed again. This time a slug punched through the dumpster inches from his head.

Bill slid down to his back and flinched as the dumpster jolted violently. He spun around to find Jonathan crouching on the dumpster lid. Bill looked up into the barrel of the shotgun, wondering if the next round was fire or lead.

Jonathan saw the question in Bill's eyes and turned the shotgun sideways to peer into the chamber. Bill drove his feet into the dumpster as hard as he could. Jonathan danced and then crashed onto the ground.

Bill kicked the shotgun away and closed the distance. He was on Jonathan raining down fists. Something snapped in his hand. A bone, just some useless bone. He tightened his fist and pounded harder, thinking nothing of it when Jonathan trapped his left foot and arm. Desperate, feeble instinct, no more. An instant later Jonathan spun Bill to his back and mounted him. He slammed an elbow into Bill's eye. And again.

Bill felt the impact, but no pain. He reached up and took handfuls of Jonathan's ears and tried his best to rip them off. The boy screamed and rose up. Bill used the last of his strength to plant his feet and arch up. Jonathan's eyes grew wide as his body lurched headfirst into the dumpster. The thud echoed down the alley as Bill struggled up.

Jonathan bounced to his feet and grinned—an expression Bill would never forget. His mouth dripped blood from the black holes where his front teeth had been a few seconds before. "You fight decent for an old guy, decent but dirty." The left side of his face was swollen and turning purple. His thermal shirt hung in taters from his body. A bruise engulfed his left pectoral muscle like a mud puddle.

"Looks like the mark a vest makes after a bullet's hit it," Bill said. "Big round too. A .357 magnum maybe?" Bill said.

Jonathan shrugged.

"So you killed seven people, congratulations monster."

"About to be eight," Jonathan said.

"And what? You strangle people with old rope and wear the Hangman's shirt as a villain angle?" Jonathan looked proud now. "The rope was in my trunk the night I decided to start killing. The Hangman stuff was later, total inspiration really. I wanted to see if I could make the town's best detective think he had a rampaging mannequin on the loose. And I'll be dammed if it didn't work."

"You'll be put to death for this," Bill said.

"Not before you do," Jonathan said, circling Bill, waiting for the right time to strike. He dropped to his knee and shot, taking Bill under his armpit and groin and slamming him to the ground.

Painful cracking. The impact left Bill gasping, but only until Jonathan clutched his throat. Bill felt the crushing grip ending him at once. His mind grew dark as he tried to break Jonathan's thumbs.

Then Jonathan's grasp dropped away.

Bill fought for breaths. Through the snowfall, he saw the impossible. Jonathan arched back unnaturally, scratching at his neck, desperate to get a finger under the frayed rope digging into his neck. His eyes rolled back and his arms dropped. His face turned the color of rotten blueberries as his body slumped to the ground.

Snow fell heavy. Bill blinked furiously and wiped the ice from his face. His eyes refocused, finding the tan, chipped face of the Hangman inches from his own. White lifeless eyes studied him.

Then there was only snow.

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Detective Bill Hardy recovered fully. "A damn lucky thing," Simmons said later, "that our boys found you before you froze, but I think the snow kept your old meat fresh while the ambulance took its sweet time." The highway was iced over, Bill applauded their caution. They gave Bill credit for slaying the Hangtown Strangler, and with a rope of all things. The papers called it poetic. Bill didn't want the credit but he was not ready to trade his badge for the crazy house, so he kept the truth to himself. Oddly, no one asked questions about a bag of gold dust stolen from the old historical museum on the night everything went down.

Bill never touched a drink again, though he poured Barbara several after the doctors called to

say that the cancer was gone.

Sometime later, Bill took a walk past the Hangman's Saloon. Loud music and sounds of rowdy fun reached the sidewalk. Above it, as always, hung the Hangman, skin brown as toast under the spring sun. Bill thought maybe the leather pouch hanging from the miner's belt looked a bit newer than the rest of him. He also thought it just might be filled with gold dust. But who could say for sure? And of course, some mysteries are best left hanging.

The End.

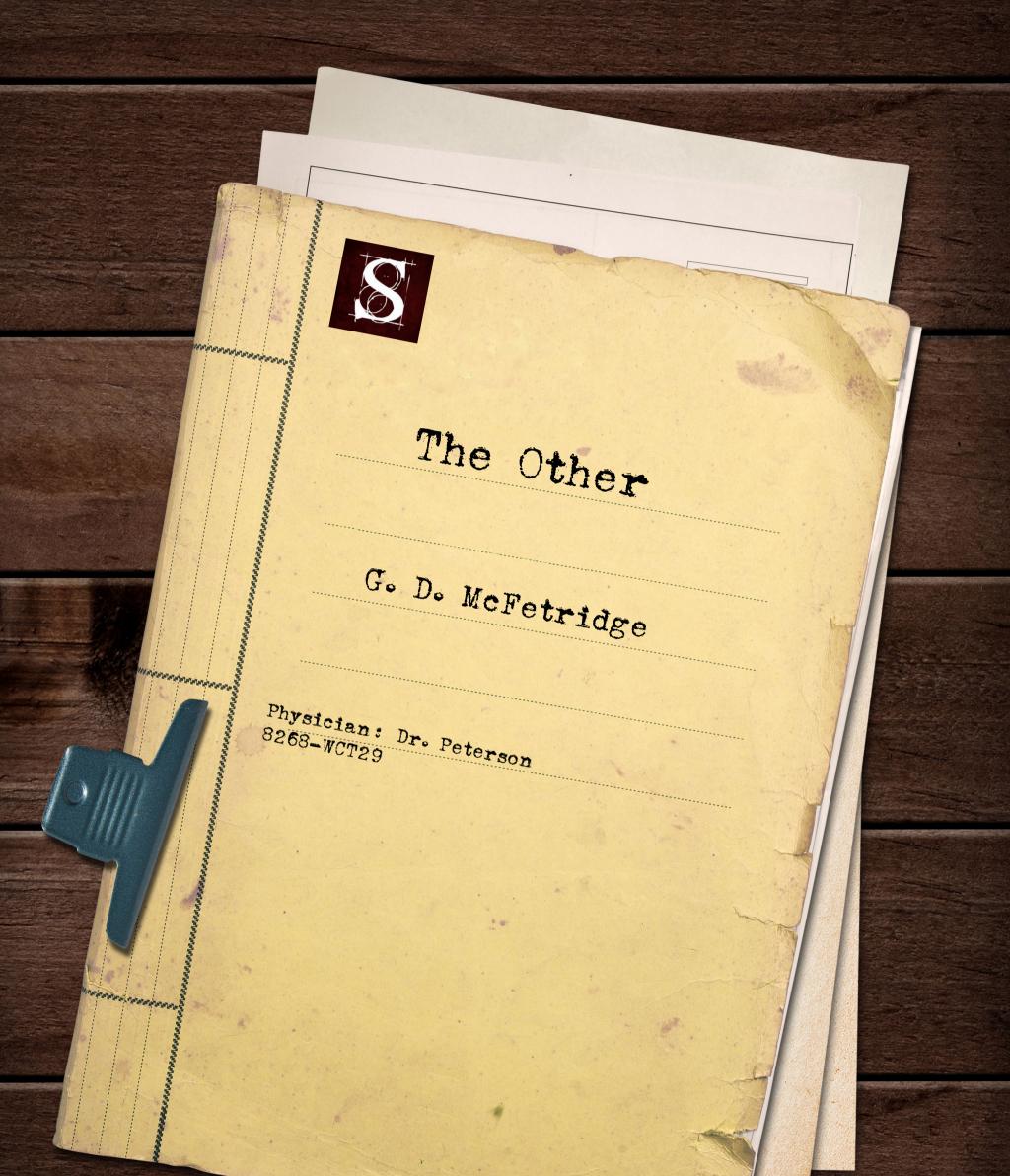


Niko Hart

Niko Hart recently made the jump from Hawaii back to his hometown of Placerville, California where the air is crisp, camouflage is a primary color, and there really is a hangman keeping watch from a second-story noose over the Hangman's Bar.

Of late, he's been working on his first book-length work A Floatable Kingdom. It centers on a Belizean refugee who inherits an island made of four-million water bottles a week before his eighteenth birthday, along with \$40,000—the family fortune—and orders from his father to go make something of himself.

His work has appeared in Dark Gothic Resurrected Magazine and Voluted Tales. Get to know him at <a href="mailto:nikohart.wordpress.com">nikohart.wordpress.com</a>





CASE #62547

#### The Other By G. D. McFetridge

"I KNOW YOU MEAN WELL," SAID FRANK EISNER, "but there's really nothing you can do. There's nothing anyone can do. The science to deal with this hasn't yet been invented."

Eisner turned away from Mia Zane and stared blankly across the valley to the horizon beyond the alluvial plains. The sun was less than an hour above the craggy high peaks of the mountains beyond the plains and the rolling hills. It was a panoramic view though neither Eisner nor Mia Zane seemed to take much notice of the splendor before them. She looked at him for a moment and then walked slowly to the edge of the large redwood deck and leaned against the railing. A gust of wind chased her auburn hair and she brushed a stray hank away from her face and glanced again at Eisner. His hands gripped the railing as if he feared he might become dizzy and tip over the edge, falling then into the void between the deck and the boulder-studded ground thirty feet below.

"Please listen to me, Frank," she began, hesitantly. "We've known each other for, what ... over ten years? That's a long time and you should know by now that I have always held your interests as if they were my own."

"That sounds nice in theory, but—"

"No! Not in theory. Don't intellectualize with me." She paused and her brow crinkled, suggesting she was selecting her words carefully. "But if you choose not to believe me, then at least believe that I have been worried about you for some time."

Eisner spit out his nicotine gum. The pale yellow blob arced away from his mouth as he watched it fall into the open space beyond the deck and then bounce off a granite boulder before disappearing into the shrubs and wild grasses.

"I suppose I want to apologize, Mia," he said. She noticed his expression reflected a fleeting trace of his old personality, an aspect of him she'd known for years, yet something that in the past several months seemed trapped within the guarded man who now stood beside her. "I know you care," he continued. "And I understand that you want to help but there's nothing you can do. Do you understand what I'm trying to tell you?"

She smiled. "If you can convince me that what you're saying is really true, then I'll never bring

it up again. I promise."

Eisner raised his eyebrows but offered no response. After a moment gazing at the mountain skyline, he looked at her with probing eyes. "I can't convince you of anything because you can't stand in my shoes. You can't see what I have seen or feel what I've been through, the madness that I have experienced. No one can."

"I'm not your doctor or your psychologist and I have no intention of trying to cure you, that's someone else's job ... if that's what you're driving at. And if you're prepared to deal with what has been happening to you on your own, then that's your business. But if that's not the case, then you should be more forthcoming. Perhaps we could devise a plan."

The wind gusted and seemed to carry her words away into the trees, making a whistling sound as it stirred the pine needles. He looked at her as if reading the lines in her face.

"Devise a plan for what? The eventuality of someone's desire to see me institutionalized?" Eisner's pale eyes were suddenly intense, lit by an inner flame, and his knuckles paled from the force with which he gripped the wood railing.

Mia Zane bowed her head as if a great weight was pressing down from above; then she massaged the bridge of her nose before turning toward Eisner. It felt like she'd bumped into an invisible wall surrounding him. A force field meant to keep everything and everyone at bay.

"Such a thought never crossed my mind," she said sharply. "I think you know that and I wish you'd stop pretending that we're in some sort of jousting match or that we are adversaries in some covert sense."

"You do understand that I have means and can go anywhere I wish." His words were abrupt, his cheeks flushing slightly pink. He turned and walked across the wide deck toward the sliding-glass door at the rear of the house.

Mia Zane followed Eisner into the house and continued following him as he went through the front door. From the door, he started walking down the gravel road connecting the property to a winding two-lane highway four miles away. He set off at a fast pace as if it was his intention to leave her and everything else behind him. But she closed the distance and soon kept with him stride for stride. On both sides of the road the shadowy forest grew thicker and higher leaving only a strip of fading blue sky above the narrow passage.

For ten minutes neither spoke, leaving only the sounds of their feet crunching over the gravel and the sporadic twittering of birds in the pine trees. Eisner was beginning to breathe harder from the vigorous pace, although Mia Zane matched him effortlessly. A few minutes later, she noticed his face seemed more relaxed than it had been ten minutes ago, a more rhythmic movement had replaced the rigid way he often carried himself. It seemed, perhaps, that a weight had lifted from his shoulders. He slowed then and turned toward her.

"Increased heart rate and constant body movement seem to make the other one uncomfortable and so usually it withdraws from my consciousness."

"Does this other have a name?" she asked. "You know we've never been formally introduced." Eisner grimaced and then walked a little faster. "I want to know something," he said. "I want to know if you think my psychological profile is outside normal parameters, if you get my meaning." "I hadn't thought about it much ... but no. All things being equal you're somewhere in the middle of the normal bell curve," she said and smiled.

He nodded his head and stopped and stood looking at her with an odd expression that was hard to decode. "I would tend to agree," he said. "But with that in mind it should be easier for you to believe me and know that this entity that haunts me isn't the byproduct of my imagination or paranoiac projections. And it's not from any drug problems."

Mia Zane wanted to give him a hug but restrained herself. Poor Frank Eisner. A bright man, very bright in fact, and in his own way the kind of person most people liked and spoke well of; yet over the last six months he'd changed—and not for the better. He saw most everything except the truth, and it seemed he had sealed himself in a cocoon woven out of his own denial.

"Shall we walk back now?" she wanted to know.

"Not yet. Let me finish what I'm trying to express. I was at a party at the Newman's home and Noreen Newman and her husband were arguing over something. I suppose she had ushered me off to act as her crying post. We were in the upstairs study and she asked me to make drinks. Now I know you're going to dismiss this, but aside from the trivial aspect of it, it rocked me worse than anything I can remember—"

"Let's walk back," Mia Zane said.

"—please let me finish. The study had its own liquor cabinet and I poured cognacs, but it wasn't till I'd reach out to give Noreen her drink that I noticed I'd poured three glasses instead of two." "And?"

"At first I didn't get it. Didn't realize the significance. I looked around the room thinking I'd see a third person—though at the same time I knew there wasn't another person—it was only the two of us, and this other being was nowhere in the world around me, no ... it was inside my own consciousness. But not in the sense of a hallucination. More like something malevolent that was somehow getting inside my head, my brain."

Mia Zane noticed the sun was low now and shadows spilled across the narrow gravel road. Birds were silent and a cool gusty breeze whipped over the tallest trees making them sway and rustle with a strange airy sound. She waited, wondering how much further the conversation would go. Frank seemed lucid enough, rational, his eyes clear and his face relaxed, however bizarre his story was.

He zipped up his jacket. "The last thing I remembered was Noreen giving me this look, half in shock. Or maybe it was apprehension, and then I came to as if from a dream and I was lying on the sofa with a wet towel on my forehead. Noreen and Hubert where standing over me seeming very uneasy if not frightened, and there was blood on my shirt from a cut on my chin. I'd fainted and hit my chin on a table. She told me the paramedics were on the way. But it didn't matter—because I was certain I was losing my mind."

Eisner paused for a moment, looking up to the darkening sky. "And I'm curious, Mia, do you believe in metaphysical possibilities, things like thought transference or telepathy?"

"It's never been something I've thought about that much, to be honest, but I suppose there are people who would argue such things exist. Are you suggesting that someone is reading your thoughts? Or projecting their thoughts into your mind?"

"That would be an oversimplification. All of this came to me in bits and pieces. Sometimes in dreams. Other times just before falling asleep or when I had been drinking too much. You might say this is too subjective, but I don't think I would agree—"

"Frank, it will be dark soon. Let's go to the house and then I'll drive you to your motel."

"That's fine," he said. "But first please listen. In the beginning it felt like a barrier or some sort of bioelectrical force field and I only sensed glimpses of it—and when I say it, I mean the other, the other being, the other consciousness that's inside my head. But then in time, these obstacles weakened and now I usually know when it's there. Just waiting for an opportunity, waiting for me to drop my guard."

"I'm not sure I understand you ... what it is you're trying to say."

"These past several weeks, night or day, drunk or sober, I sense this other being. As we speak, it has withdrawn, retreated, as if it's watching from a distance or hidden inside a cloud of fog, waiting. Always waiting to make a move."

"A move toward what?"

"Taking me over. But I've hoped that by constant resistance this otherness would grow tired of our struggle and search out some other psyche to invade, some other consciousness."

They were walking again but at a slower pace. Eisner's tone had been consistent and calm, although when he resumed speaking his voice was close to breaking. He fished in his pocket for another nicotine gum.

"Mia," he said, "try imagining what this is like, the repulsion and horror of realizing that everything you think, every action you intend, each desire or notion flitting through your mind is being watched and shared by this other awareness, this creature—it's like a psychological leech feeding off you, feeding off your thoughts and feelings. Life as I had always known it was over. So I took off to escape, to escape anywhere, everywhere, trying to get away."

Mia Zane gave him a sideways look as they walked through the darkening forest. "Maybe I understand better now," she said carefully. "Are you saying that this being is a telepathic voyeur, an intruder who has designs? Maybe it wants something more from you, something beyond watching or listening, or even taking over your mind."

Eisner shook his head and wrinkled his brow. "Are you patronizing me?"

"Of course not," she said. The wind gusted harder and the first few stars dimly twinkled in the eastern sky.

"Well ... even if you were," he said, "I wouldn't care so much because the truth is you've summed it up fairly accurately. It took a long time for me to realize what this thing's purpose was, its intentions. After I got over the initial disruption and shock, I did my best to analyze objectively what was happening. I traced back week by week, month by month, and eventually I figured out that it wasn't an acute invasion of my mind, not something abrupt or sudden ... no, maybe it had been going on for a long time. I mean it was already there but well hidden, integrated into my mind too cleverly."

Mia Zane listened but said nothing. It felt as if she'd passed through a strange threshold and he was leading her the entire way. But to what end? He continued explaining how the other shared his emotions, fed off them perhaps, and even wallowed in prolonged or extreme feelings—sadness, fear, anger, jealousy, or sexual arousal.

The way Eisner maintained control was by always resisting, fighting back, trying to get inside the other the way the other had gotten inside of him. And finally he succeeded—but the other was incredibly distant, or maybe existed in some other parallel realm, and because of this remoteness the other somehow suffered limitations to its powers.

"So tell me something ... how do you explain why this happened in the first place?" Mia Zane asked.

"Maybe the first contact was accidental, like when you're looking for one particular object and by chance find something else. Or that through me it could find others."

Eisner stopped walking and waited for her to face him. In the twilight, her features were only vaguely discernible, yet moonlight faintly glimmered in her eyes. He asked if she thought it possible—having once admitted the existence of telepathy—that the other existed beyond the limits of normal time. Or that it could project itself through time. He suspected it could, and that it was in fact of a different time and from a distant location, and maybe from somewhere in an undefined future, or maybe even the past—or that time didn't exist for the other the way it exists for humans. Maybe the other was a member of a whole race of beings from somewhere in the galactic vicinity, the endless vacuity, phasing in and out of different dimensions. Was it possible that this advanced race was beyond physical existence, dwelling solely in the energy of thought, and as such longing for reconnection to their bodily past?

But that seemed too clichéd. There was also this sense of evil intelligence, a covert purpose and shrewdness. Then, at other times, it seemed possible that it was more a case of investigation, and the other was acting as a scientist, studying Eisner—studying many different subjects—yet toward what end?

Could any of this explain religious beliefs concerning possession? Down through the ages the same process repeating itself. And if so, how many like the other were among us?

"Tell me what the other is like," Mia Zane said.

"That's not possible. I think it would be like trying to describe a sunset to someone who was blind at birth. There's no mutual framework or common ground from which to create a description. No context."

"You have no sense of the other, not even a vague feeling?"

"Let me try this: Imagine when you hear a piece of music, one that moves you, or imagine a great orator whose words send a quiver up your spine. That could be a starting point, the other I mean, it's a feeling almost, a tickling or quivering sensation in the center of my head, like a mild electrical current. Or maybe you could say it's like something scratching inside your head, scratching at your consciousness to get deeper inside."

"Let's go back to the house, it's nearly dark, I don't want to twist an ankle," Mia Zane said.

"If you know that you know with great clarity, then can you still doubt yourself?" he asked. "You see I know I'm not insane. Because I'm rational, I also understand that you can't believe me—it's like when someone tells you that they've seen spacemen. It doesn't register as concrete or real. Because it's not a shared experience. What does my telling you about spacemen mean in terms of your reality?"

"To be honest, Frank, I don't believe you, not in the sense you wish me to, but from a psychological perspective it doesn't matter, because what you're experiencing is real to you. And therefore that's the starting point. We'll work forward from there."

"Toward what end?"

"Toward vanquishing the other from your mind."

"That sounds good in theory, but what if the other has a different agenda? What if it decides to resist? I'm unsure of its potentials. Its real power."

As they continued walking the porch light of the house shown dimly in the distance. The night was growing colder and the wind had brought clouds from the northwest veiling the moonlight, making the road seem little more than a narrow stream of shadow cutting through the forest. Mia wondered to herself why people invented wild stories, why they dwelled in outlandish impossibilities. The stock answers in the coterie of textbook explanations included everything from Freudian interpretations to existential angst and the ultimate fear of death and meaninglessness. Was this the case with Eisner? Was his life so desperately meaningless that in order to endure he'd invented an elaborate fantasy? The particulars were too complex, so instead it was more a question of how to jar Eisner loose, to free him from this imaginary world. But how?

Five minutes walking in silence brought them to the front door of the large two-story house. Mia Zane opened the ornately carved oak door and led Eisner through the entry room and down a hallway to the library and sitting room. Once seated on the sofa she offered him a drink. But he declined and said that alcohol undermined his ability to resist the intrusions of the other. She poured herself a glass of white wine.

"When will Upton get home?" Eisner asked, his expression indifferent.

"He's always late on Wednesdays ... probably nine or ten. Do you want me to drive you to the motel or would you like something to eat?"

"Not really hungry."

Mia Zane sipped her wine and Eisner chewed gum. He was thinking about time and how it acted as a barrier between events, how it kept things from being in the same place at the same moment. Yet the other seemed unburdened by time in some ineffable way and accordingly moved through time the way a fish swims up or down a stream.

That was what frightened Eisner, because the other could know the future or the past. Like a video fast-forwarded or rewound. In this way, the other could delve into any aspect of Eisner's past life or into his future. The other might even know the exact hour of Eisner's death. The how and where and why of it. The thought made a cold shiver pulsate up his spine into the base of his skull. Like something creeping.

"What's the matter?" Mia asked.

"Oh ... nothing I can explain. But you know I suffer insomnia at times, more often lately, and when it happens for several days, it's like never being awake and never being asleep, purgatorial almost. The other is always present when I can't sleep, as if it enjoys feeding off my torment."

"Frank, you need to see someone, really. Even if only to help you sleep."

"I need to get this thing out of my head for good."

Mia Zane finished her wine and set the long-stemmed glass on the coffee table. Eisner got to his feet and walked aimlessly about the room, between chairs and around the oak desk, then finally he stood before the long oak bookshelves examining various titles.

"See something you like?" she asked.

Eisner shook his head. His eyes continued tracking along the books. He turned and looked at her, and then his eyes narrowed and his lips drew tight as if resisting a sharp pain. He brought his hands to his head and pressed them against his skull.

"No!" he shouted. He suddenly ran from the library into the hallway and toward the rear of the house. She stood from her chair and followed him, but he was too far ahead and all she saw was his silhouette disappearing out the back door. As she reached the door and looked out across the wooden deck, she saw Eisner standing atop the handrail.

"Frank, no!" she screamed. He turned and gave her a last look, a frantic look, and then dived off the railing into the inky darkness. A moment later she heard a heavy thumping sound and an eerie moan. Then the only sounds were crickets and the wind softly whistling in the tall pine trees.

She walked halfway across the deck and stopped, wiping tears. Something was buzzing around her head. Or so it seemed. But then she felt a strange electrical tickle between her ears, and a vague scratching sensation, something probing at the center of her mind.



G. D. McFetridge

G. D. McFetridge, iconoclast and philosopher, writes from his wilderness home in Montana's majestic Sapphire Mountains. He is the author of 6 novels, 157 short stories, and 13 essays. His fiction and essays are published in academic journals and reviews as well as commercial literary magazines, across America, in Canada and Australia, India, Germany, Ireland and the UK. Most recently, his work has appeared in The Long Story; The Lost Country; The Lampeter Review, University of Wales; Confrontation, University of Long Island; Broadkill Review; Foliate Oak, University of Arkansas; Weber, The Contemporary West, Weber State College, Utah; The Antigonish Review, St. Francis Xavier University, Nova Scotia. However, 49 New York City literary agents have rejected his latest novel, The Jesus Genome. Which might indicate that it's a potential bestseller!

# Halloween - 1979 Lloyd A. Green



CASE #65449

## Halloween - 1979 By Lloyd A. Green

THE LONG DRIVE HAD BEEN A BIT UNSETTLING for Dyllon. He shifted to the left in the driver's seat, but couldn't find a comfortable spot. The late night fog persisted in following them no matter which way their vehicle turned. As the group headed towards the 13th Street exit on Interstate 70, Dyllon realized that they had been driving for nearly an hour. By his estimates, they should have been there by now.

"Are you tired?" Kelly asked from the seat next to him. "You seem restless."

"No, I'm fine," he guickly responded to his wife. "I'm too scared to be tired."

Kelly smiled at him sweetly, shook her head and turned around to continue her conversation with her friend in the backseat.

It was Halloween night and Kelly's friend Millie had recommended that the best way to celebrate would be to take a trip to a particular house of horrors in downtown Kansas City. She had visited the place last week with some other friends of hers and she couldn't stop talking about it. Millie had insisted on this outing and she wasn't taking no for an answer.

Prior to tonight, Dyllon had not met Millie or her overly talkative husband, Willis, who occupied the remaining seat in the rear. Regardless of how Dyllon felt about meeting new people, the chance to visit one of the city's set-up haunted houses sounded like the perfect way to spend this special evening.

But there was something about Millie's husband that did not sit well with Dyllon. The guy seemed pretty quiet at first, but then for the longest while, all he could do was talk about adding structural additions to his home. Couldn't he tell that no one else was really interested?

Attempting to be open minded, Dyllon decided to start a new topic of conversation.

"This Halloween seems to be a particularly gloomy one. We could make better time if it wasn't for this fog."

"I kind of like it this way," Willis replied. "It helps add atmosphere to the night. The fog supplies the extra texture to place everyone in the mood for a good scare."

"A bunch of people in scary masks and crazy costumes tends to get boring year after year

though," Dyllon said.

"It wasn't always like that," Willis said. "I mean. That's not the way it started out."

"What do you mean?" Kelly said sounding curious.

"Well, if you really want to know," Willis replied. "The celebration we call Halloween started back around the 5th century B.C in Ireland. On the nights of October 31st and November 1st, Druid priests would start bonfires and others would gather to honor the sun god for the past summer's fruitful harvest. They would call this time Samhain, which was seen as the time when the door to the Otherworld would open and spirits could enter our world. Folks would even extinguish the fires in their homes to make the area cold and uncomfortable. This was in the hope of scaring away clandestine spirits. Back then, the night of the 31st was called All Hallow's Eve."

"Sorry that I asked," Kelly said as she turned her attention away from Willis in the backseat.

Kelly glanced at Millie who was staring at her husband during his tirade. She was nervously biting on her lower lip while torturing a strand of her sandy blond hair. She seemed to be hanging on his every word.

Kelly was about to ask her friend about this odd behavior when Dyllon cut in.

"You seem to be an authority," Dyllon said towards Willis. "Where did the costume part come from?"

"Well, it wasn't until 1000 A.D., that that kind of thing started. The Christian church made November 2nd the day to celebrate the dead, which was called All Souls Day. Again, there were large bonfires and parades, but those celebrating also began dressing up as saints, angels and devils. The wearing of these costumes eventually came to be known as Guising.

Dyllon was fascinated with the topic, but felt like the guy was being a bit too snooty. He wanted to know more, but he also wanted to trip this guy up, at least just a little.

"Where did the name Halloween come from?" Dyllon asked.

Willis could see that Dyllon was looking at him in the rear-view mirror so he spoke directly to him there when he answered.

"When eventually the three traditions of All Saints, All Hallows and All Souls were combined, they came to be known as Hallowmas. In the 16th century, the festival was known as All Hallows' Even or evening. Somewhere along the way, many found it simpler to just say Halloween."

"All sounds very dark," Dyllon said. "Anything terrible ever happen on Halloween besides the Tricks?"

"One of the most famous events was when the magician Houdini died of gangrene from a ruptured appendix. The organ got damaged when he got punched in the stomach about twelve days earlier. His refusal to seek medical attention prior to the blow is probably what killed him. He died on October 31st 1926."

"You seem to be an encyclopedia of Halloween facts," Dyllon said. "What if I just throw out a year? Think you can tell me an event that occurred on October 31st?"

"I could try," Willis responded.

"Dyllon," Kelly intervened. "That's not fair. How could he answer that?"

"Won't know until I ask," Dyllon replied and he placed his free hand on her leg.

Dyllon glanced again into the mirror before he spoke.

"1952?"

"That's easy," Willis quickly responded. "The first hydrogen bomb was detonated in the Marshall Islands in 1952. That thermonuclear device was 750 times larger than the bomb that was dropped on Hiroshima in 1945. All residents were cleared from the area, but with what we now know about fall-out, it's unlikely that no one was affected."

"How about Halloween 1961?" Dyllon said doggedly.

"Hurricane Hattie killed 400 people in British Honduras," Willis said resolutely.

"1963?" Dyllon said feeling less like he might win at this game.

"During a Holiday on Ice event in the Indiana State Fair Coliseum, a propane leak caused a concession stand tank to explode. 74 people were killed. About 400 people were injured."

Dyllon felt stunned. He wanted to ask one last question, but hesitated. He could tell by how quiet Kelly had become that he was irritating her with this competition he was playing. He decided to hold his tongue.

The road they were on soon turned to the 12th Street portion of the elevated ramp. Kelly spoke

as she pointed in the distance at a building just before they passed it.

"This has been a very fascinating conversation, but I think we've getting close to our destination."

The five-story building, which they sought, could be seen to their right from their spot on the ramp. On the upper portion of the edifice, the brightly lit neon sign displayed the burning letters, THE EDGE OF HELL.

As the road descended to street level, they had to circle a few blocks to the right until they eventually made a final right on 12th Street. The elevated ramp that they had left now ran parallel to the street and its sturdy columns directed them towards the structure that they were hunting for. Both on the 12th Street section of the industrial district and beneath the quiet of the ramp, there were numerous parking spaces for the taking.

"That can't be this many parking spaces so close," Dyllon said. "We're just a block away from the place."

"Sounds like a complaint," Kelly said.

"No. Just amazed," Dyllon said as he inadvertently bumped his right tire into the curb while parking.

Kelly could tell by Dyllon's fidgeting that he was getting ready to say something. He shut off the engine and then turned to speak to Willis.

"Okay, Mr. Halloween," Dyllon finally said. "One last question. I know that this gloomy Wednesday is still young, but have any dire circumstances occurred on this Hallows Eve night?" Willis was about to answer when Millie placed her hand over his mouth.

"I guess you guys weren't listening to the radio when we started this trip," she said. "They said a DC-10 struck a vehicle while still on the ground in New Mexico. It was pretty bad. By the last count, they were certain that 72 people died in the crash."

Everyone was silent in the car for a few moments until Kelly finally spoke.

"All this talk of death is scaring the crap out of me," she said. "It's really hard enough walking into this haunted house. Are you two guys finished? I'm really frightened."

"Sorry," both men said simultaneously to their partners.

This caused a light moment of laughter throughout the group as they got out of the car. As they walked the short distance to the building, the silence was soon broken.

"Willis is right," Dyllon said as he turned to the group. "Tonight we will witness the macabre. Thank you for setting the mood."

"I guess that I have to apologize," Willis said, "but that's all I was trying to do. That is besides building up my own ego. I've loved reading about scary stuff ever since I was a kid."

As Kelly and Millie led the way, their husbands held their hands as they trailed them through the dark red double doors of 1300 West 12th Street. Just inside the doorway, Dyllon heard a guy talking to his friend.

"I'm looking forward to that curly slide which runs down the back of the building. That part is the best."

Dyllon would keep his eyes open for this, but there seemed to be more immediate concerns.

The group screamed as costumed scaries shot out unannounced from hidden doorways. The place was filled with ghouls and goblins that seemed to be having more fun than those that they were entertaining. While walking through a close hallway, Dyllon was startled when he felt cobweb-like material brushing pass his face and then had to jump when someone close to the floor strongly grabbed his ankle for just a second.

There was even one semi-dark room that had generous 16th century decorations adorning the walls, but there were no actors anywhere to be seen. As the group moved forward, strobe lights began to flicker at an ever-accelerated tempo. The anxiety was high as they all waited for someone or something to jump out of a door or from a hidden spot in the wall. They were almost to the next area and the strobes ceased as Kelly spoke.

"They did that on purpose. There was nothing going on in that room except for our own imagination and fear. I'm still shaking from the anticipation of waiting to be scared."

"This is great," Dyllon thought to himself. He loved the psychology of fear that had been amassed in order to create this place. He also realized that all the time that they were walking, they were either hiking up ramped passages or climbing stairs.

After almost a half an hour of wandering about, waiting for the next scare and even getting a bit lost, they approached an area that was quite different than the previous rooms they had seen.

There was soft melodic music emanating from hidden speakers somewhere close by. The artists that they passed were not attempting to scare them at all. There were about five or six of these actors who were standing before a background of what seemed like cotton soft clouds. Some had their palms together as if in prayer and the others were smiling while requesting that we keep moving along. White lights from overhead bathed everyone and some actors even had feathered wings, which seemed to mean that they were supposed to be angels. One of the women had a toy-like harp, which she was trying to play along with the faint music. This could only be Heaven.

Just before turning the corner from this event, Dyllon realized that since they had walked into the building, Willis had not spoken a word. As the wives were screaming and Dyllon was laughing, Willis had been strangely silent. Dyllon stopped for a moment to ask a quick question.

"Hey, man. Aren't you scared?"

Dyllon had simply been too caught up in his own world, but now he could see that Willis was shaking like a leaf.

"Are you kidding," Willis finally responded. "I'm scared out of my mind. When is this thing going to be over?"

Dyllon pointed to something that he saw up ahead.

"I think we're coming to the end," he said while he patted Willis on his shoulder. Dyllon quietly smiled to himself about the unexpected reactions of the King of the Scary.

As they approached, the once lit area gradually grew darker. There were two guys dressed in raggedy clothing, requesting that their group either move in the direction of a door which had CHICKEN EXIT painted on it or towards a round opening in the wall which brightly had the words THE VORTEX painted over it.

"Why come this far and not see the rest of the show," Dyllon said to everyone. The raggedy men would only allow one person at a time into the mouth of the chute. Dyllon not so bravely stepped forward to be first.

Dyllon knew this had to be the twisted slide that he had heard was on the outside of the building. He hesitated for only a moment before he sat down and began his descent.

The continuous darkness was claustrophobic as Dyllon twisted and turned down the windy, sponge-lined tube. He realized that he must have been sliding back to the ground floor, but in dizzying circles to the right, over and over again.

As the opening could be seen before his feet, suddenly Dyllon shot out of the tube for a quite a few yards. He rolled to the right and then finally came to a stop on the floor.

A small-gloved hand reached out to assist him to his feet. After Dyllon was able to orientate himself to his immediate surroundings, he saw that the tiny guy had small horns budding from either side of his forehead. At first, Dyllon chuckled at such a layperson attempt at scaring him. But as Dyllon heard what sounded like forceful organ music playing, he twisted his head to the right. That was when he saw him.

He sat on a dark wooden throne and he was bathed in subdued red light. On the rational side, this was simply a large, muscular guy whose half naked body was covered in red paint. Behind him, stood tall organ pipes from which the strong, haunting music seemed to be emanating. On the irrational side, Dyllon wondered whether he was having a wide-awake nightmare.

The demon, who sat about fifteen feet away, bore huge horns which curled until they finally pointed in Dyllon's direction. The thing was fingering a rather sharp looking pitchfork in his right hand. A broad smile suddenly grew on his face as he stared deeply into Dyllon's eyes. With his left hand, the creature motioned his index finger in a curling motion as if he were inviting Dyllon to walk towards him.

Every fantasy, childhood fear or nightmare, could not compete with what Dyllon was experiencing. He knew that this had to all just be a joke, but he could not feel even mildly amused. His only thought was that this pit he had fallen into had to be Hell and that the being before him was truly the Devil incarnate. As he stood there trembling before the crimson figure, Dyllon realized that he had a decision to make.

In front of Dyllon, was a path, which headed in the demon's direction then veered to the right towards a darkened door. The only way to that exit was to pass within a few feet of the demon himself. There was no avoiding this.

The monster's smile became even wider as his prey grew closer. All Dyllon could do was press

his back into the wall as he did his best to keep as much space between himself and the crimson fiend. Dyllon could feel his jacket scraping noisily across the cold brick behind him. The demon turned his head slightly, but did not attempt to move towards him.

As their eyes met, Dyllon swore that he heard a low whisper of a voice.

"You will soon be mine."

Dyllon could see that the devil's lips never moved, but he was certain about what he heard. Dyllon mashed his back into the wall as he shuffled his feet to the right.

"Please don't let this thing reach out and touch me," Dyllon thought to himself. "If he does, I'm going to lose my mind."

Before he could see it, Dyllon felt his hand on the cold metallic door. He pushed quickly through the exit, which led him out into the night air.

One by one, each member of his crew appeared next to him. Kelly and Millie shook with fear, but eventually they laughed as the group quietly found their way to the vehicle.

"You okay," Kelly asked seeing that Dyllon was obviously shaken.

"The people in there earned their pay for the night," he said. "I'm not going to be able to sleep." Millie then spoke to her husband.

"Anything you'd like to add, Honey?"

"You're not being funny," he said. "You never told me it was going to be that bad."

"Sorry," Millie said. "Thought it might be fun."

She began laughing and she grabbed hold of his arm as they walked.

"Let's get something to eat," Kelly said. "Hopefully we can find someplace that has scary burgers."

"Funny," Dyllon said as he feigned a chuckle. "I'll bite you later."

Dyllon attempted to calmly sit in the driver's seat but he could not help but think about what the devil had wordlessly said to him.

"You will soon be mine," he had whispered.

"It was probably just a good scare and nothing more," he thought to himself.

Dyllon began to slowly move the car, being careful not to bump the curb this time. He checked the rear view mirror only to see that there were two fiery bright eyes staring back at him. There was no mistaking the sandy blond hair of Millie, but the flesh, which it surrounded, was a horribly scarred reddish color. And yes. There were the distorted horns. They were shorter than before but just long enough to push through the grossly entwined yellow strands. Dyllon watched the reflection in terror as the demon grinned and raised its curled finger, as if beaconing him.

His foot was already pressing hard on the brake and he found that he couldn't move. Dyllon desperately wanted to grab the door handle and run from the car but his body would not respond to his fears. It was not until he felt bony fingers clutching and pulling back on his shoulder that he loudly screamed in blind terror.

Kelly jumped, with her head almost hitting the roof of the car. She quickly turned in his direction and then saw the hand gripping at Dyllon.

"Millie," she shrieked. "What are you doing?"

After retrieving her hand, Millie began doubling over with laughter. She dragged the rubbery mask from her face. As she laughed through her tears, she finally caught her breath so she could answer.

"I'm sorry. I've wanted to do that since last week. Forgive me please, everybody. Happy Halloween."

Regardless of the apology, Millie's minor chuckles turned to another round of uncontrolled laughter.

Kelly watched as Dyllon simply put the car in gear and turned the wheel to the left. His tight grimace meant that he was too angry to respond.

She gazed back at Millie in disbelief and noticed that she heard nothing from Willis. He sat wordless, as he peered though the steamy glass close to him.

"Guess he knows his wife," Kelly thought to herself.

The vehicle moved off the local street and turned into the quiet obscurity of the night for the very long drive home.



Lloyd A. Green

I often use photography and videography as a jumping off point to my writing. Fragile memory will at times mold new renderings, which fall short of the original experience and one sometimes forgets. In the search of inspiration, I've found that although memory may be fickle, the imagination is never short on words. My true love is writing dark fiction filled with hidden secrets and unexpected twists. Further explore my world at <a href="EndlessPerceptions.com">EndlessPerceptions.com</a> and <a href="LloydGreen.org">LloydGreen.org</a>.



# There Lives a Man

Kyle Short

Physician: Dr. Lotherton 8715-AED19



CASE #46889

### There Lives a Man By Kyle Short

There lives a man who cannot attain
He can no longer walk and his legs become lame
The legs that won't work have feet that are bowed
And far to his south are ten broken toes

What do you call him who forgets his name? He takes no umbrella to lie in the rain He feels he's been cheated and sees only pain His heart has been broken and that's what he blames

"Curse this foul heart! Get it out of my chest!"
The pills that he swallows will slow down his breath
"Nobody knows me or cares if I die"
He recalls his name, then calls it a lie

While fighting for sleep, he does drift away And dreams of a distant, magnificent place No stranger is known, merely friends meet his eye No longer forgotten, alone or demised

"Am I in Heaven?" he thinks in his head "Surely I'm dreaming," were words that he said He walks without pain or a fear in his mind That love again finds him, then leaves him behind

Remembering a time when life was not cursed Before his beloved was taken by hearse Before all the booze and the pills and the hate The nightmares and torments his dreams would create

Marylou Lee was the bride's name to be She cried for an hour when he took a knee He gave her the ring and his heart and his soul He gave her his reigns and let her take control

Marylou knew that her soul mate was found The two were together as if they were bound Her man had not riches, but knew how to toil He scrimped and he saved as he worked in the soil

For two years he planned perfection for her Deserving the best, he'll give her the world She was simplistic, she needed no gold She only wanted her man's hand to hold

The day before marriage they did celebrate
A trip to the pub after food on a plate
Feeling the buzz they walked home from the town
A buzz that was stronger ran both of them down

His body awoke but his soul died that night Mary had lost both her soul and her life All that she wanted was to be with him He was her soul mate, her lover, best friend

All that he had, had been stripped away
The driver who took her did find her same fate
There was now nothing that her man could do
He numbed himself down, fifteen years full of booze

The radiance and warmth recalls back his mind A voice beckons him, coming up from behind "Who knows me here, in this world without pain? Who knows me here or remembers my name?"

He turns and meets the voice that did call "Marylou Lee?" as the tears start to fall "Jacob, my love, I have waited up here Fifteen long years without pain, without fear."

Rejoined again for a moment of time Apologies spoken seem far out of line Distance and hurt will indeed play a part But healing will come when it comes from the heart

A dream or a death will not break away
The light of the moon or the warmth of the day
Is this a dream or had Jacob died?
I leave the end for you to decide



Kyle Short

J Kyle Short has been writing for over seventeen years, only recently taking a serious turn at attempts to become published. He writes somewhat darker poetry that speaks about life and his personal viewpoint on the current standings of society. Albeit "dark" writings, there will always be a source of light trying to peer through into the eyes of the readers or characters involved. His mostly true stories have sparked an interest in persons going through struggles who are unable of finding help or seeing hope. J Kyle will continue to write as long as others will find use of his words.

Upcoming works include a self-publication titled A Poet's Blight which tells tales of struggle through rhyme. The everyday occurrences that afflict society are illustrated in these writings. A plague of drugs, death and dis-ease continues to sweep across the Nation; it matters not what race, creed or title an individual holds. In these verses the author attempts to show the Light that exists within the darkest, most decrepit of corners. In disparaging times, one must change their viewpoint in order to see the beauty that surrounds. We all may feel lost, yet we all are able to be found.

S

## The Inbetween

Colin Brooks

Physician: Dr. Lichten 6428-SED41



#### CASE #34654

## The Inbetween By Colin Brooks

In the in-between We force our eyes From the shadows Of the tall walkers

Their faces were far Perched upon shoulders Yards higher than eye level

They were cloaked In oil slick coats And long thigh high boots

Their skin never showed But we had to think It was pale Pale like stone

Their limbs were lengthy
And jagged like branches
Running their fingers
Over our heads
As they patrolled the streets

They walked down the cobblestone Their heeled black leather Stomping femininely Steering through crowds Staring into windows only They were level with

Their jobs were relatively unknown
Besides that they were watchers
Wanderers that decided
To stick around
And put themselves
To good use

They were undisturbed And undisputed These misunderstood Giants of the modern land



Colin Brooks

Colin Brooks is a Horror writer and poet currently living in Marlborough, Massachusetts. His focus is in atmospheric horror and weird poetry, channeling the likes of Aleister Crowley and Thomas Ligotti in his work. He has studied and focused on the work of many of the great 20th century occultists. He is working on a collection of his horror poetry and short fiction.



## Never Grow Up

James Michael Shoberg

Physician: Dr. Edgar 9828-SJE41



#### CASE #69586

#### Never Grow Up By James Michael Shoberg

How desperately Christopher loved Peter Pan,

Outside, with arms spread, through the backyard he ran.

Not "ran," not to Chris, no that word wasn't right.

For each step he took, simulated Pan's flight.

His friends were the pirates and Wendy his goal.

(Chris slyly had cast his first crush in the role.)

But he'd only play as the elf-boy who flew.

"The swords are all mine, so go home or be crew!"

The oldest among them—his claw-handed foe—

Said, "One small condition and then you can crow.

In this single instance, my buccaneers win,"

And ended his pitch with a devious grin.

"Fine, I'll let you beat me, if parts stay the same,

But who will save Wendy when we play the game?"

"Why, bravely, you'll offer to take the girl's place,

A valiant gesture, I'd say in this case."

"Then why is she leaving? We haven't begun."

"I fear you're mistaken. The trade is now done!"

The "pirates" seized "Peter" and dragged him away,

The last to have seen him alive on that day.

In time, the lost boy was found where he'd been stuck,

Poetically hooked on his father's tow truck.

And now when they play, every kid that joins learns,

"No one has to die, if we all just take turns."



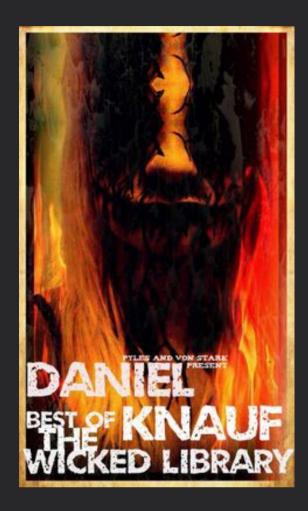
James Michael Shoberg

JAMES MICHAEL SHOBERG is an award-winning actor and playwright, as well as a designer and director. His writing credits include numerous fringe plays and collections of both monologues and poems. James is also the Co-Executive Producer, Artistic Director, and Resident Playwright of The Rage of the Stage Players, a fringe theatre company in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. In 2011, he acquired the permission of the filmmakers known as The Butcher Brothers, and Lionsgate Films, to write, produce, and direct a world-premiere stage adaptation of their award-winning independent horror film, The Hamiltons, for The Rage of the Stage Players. James' unique brand of twisted theatre has already attracted attention both nationally and internationally. His most recent endeavor is a currently untitled book of horror poetry for young adults, excerpts of which have appeared in Beyond the Nightlight, Cellar Door III: Animals, Pavor Nocturnus Dark Fiction Anthology, Sanitarium Magazine, Sick as Fuck Horror Anthology, and Under the Bed Magazine, just to name a few.

http://www.facebook.com/rageofthestage



#### THE WICKED LIBRARY



Thank you for partnering up with Sanitarium! We super excited to work with you all. Tell us a little bit about the Wicked Library. How did it start?

NELSON: My friend Jon Towers invited me to do a show for his podcast network. The idea was originally to do classic horror short stories dramatically, but the idea changed to focus on new, independent authors as a way to help promote them. We've all heard of Edgar Allan Poe, and he was great, but have you heard of Lydia Peever, Kerry Lipp or Sydney Leigh? They're great too, and frankly, Edgar at this point doesn't need the publicity. During the second season, Maddie came on board to do original concept art for each author's story which helped make the show a bit more unique and really gave us a new launching point. Maddie's an author as well as a smoking artist, and she brought such a great sensibility to the artwork she makes for the show.

VON STARK: Nelson contacted me originally to have my written work on the podcast. Instantly, we were partners

in crime. I love creating images for stories that out - creeps itself each week. I often send Nelson an IM saying, "This week's art is more disturbing than the last." To which he responds, "Its outta the Park Von Stark!" Which makes me smile. I am also super happy when the author feels that the work represents their story in the Wicked Library's killer style. So, Nelson gave me a very Wicked Way to play with my artistic expression.

What do you look for in the stories you feature in your podcasts? Outside of all things "wicked," what characteristics stand out as an author to feature?

NELSON: The stories for me need to be fresh and interesting. There needs to be something to believe in, even if the plot is completely implausible. As a reader, you can figure out quickly if the author believes in what he or she has written. If the author buys it, then chances are, I will too and subsequently, the audience. I want to care about your characters-even the ones doing bad things.

VON STARK: The words must bind together in a way that the stories are completely original! And every author that has been featured on the Wicked Library is brilliant in Nelson's modus operandi! (I like to use the fifty-cent words.... I should have said methodology.) Perhaps each author has a formidable formula that is unique is story telling, which is mischievous, and I like that.

Having a podcast is certainly a sign of the changing mediums in which fans can reach out and be in touch with their favorite literary genres and authors. What element does hearing a story versus reading it bring to the table when it comes to horror?

NELSON: I've always loved audio books-not necessarily as an alternative to reading, but more an alternative to listening to the radio or not reading. A lot of friends complain that they would love to read more, but sitting in an office all day tends to get in the way. I

wanted to have a podcast that would satisfy the urge to read, albeit in small doses. The great thing about this podcast is that it really does put you in closer contact to authors. We do get the occasional bestseller on the show and we plug them just like the other authors, including contact info. I get email thanking me for introducing them to writers they've never heard of and writers who are pretty big.

VON STARK: Well, it's the rogue innovators that chase down technology to raise some hell. And the world is changing. Instead of printing books, humanity squirrels away all their ideas in data that we ingest like food. So we have to be pioneers of a new medium. We are a lot like Lovecraft in that way. I believe Mr. Lovecraft would like our podcast for the simple dynamics of the communication mechanism. The Wicked Library is run by two souls on the fringe trying to raise some digital hades. But, I find this just as delightful as sitting around a fire at night telling chilling stories. Being from the north woods of Wisconsin I heard many a yarn about the likes of Ed Gein , John Wayne Gacy and Jeffrey Dahmer. I think Nelson captures that spirit of storytelling. I just make it look pretty. Ok, maybe "pretty" isn't the right word.... I make it sparkle darkly!

Tell our readers a little bit about Nelson and Maddie. What are their interests outside of the Wicked Library and how do they bring their personalities to work every day?

NELSON: I'm first and foremost an author. I think that probably fuels the desire to help other independent authors to promote their work; it's something Maddie and I both feel strongly about. I'm also a musician. Everything I do usually goes back to writing in some way or fashion. Podcasting itself is an extension of all of it right down to the performance part of the show.

VON STARK: \* taps fingers together \* I am definitely the crazier of Nelson/Maddie Inc. Mostly, I like to hang out with my hairless Chihuahua, Mr. Wu. Then in my spare time...I have just finished my first novel and am wrapping that up. Nelson and I are working on our first anthology, "Book 38."

Which consists of 38 writers that have been assigned a "ghost town" or an "abandoned" place. I am doing the artwork, which even gives me fits when it comes to sleeping. Did I mention I am an insomniac? Currently, I am working on the "Sydney Night or Horror Film Festival." I keep it creepy!

We feature a lot of both seasoned and upand-coming writers in our magazine. How do you think the genre of horror literature is changing and what advice do you have for new authors looking to break into the scene?

NELSON: The genre is ever changing as more things surface to terrify us which is to say, things more or less remain the same. Technology, terrorism, religious fanatics... pretty much the things that have always terrified us. However, the delivery system is changing. E-books, podcasts, self-publishing... the face of it may change, but the main component remains dread, and you can't fake that ever. You can make it look like horror, but unless it is solid writing, it won't work. The best piece of advice I can give to other writers is to keep writing and reading. It's been said a million times, mainly because it's true. Keep writing and submitting and do not stop. Ever.

VON STARK: Be an innovator. Be a risk taker. Stand on the eve of elation and catapult yourself into the tentacles of story telling. With that being said, I would suggest that if you have never written an actual novel or short story in the horror genre, find someone who has. NETWORK. Facebook and Twitter are great digital sources for the rookie writer. Having a writing mentor is a great way to find your path through the discipline and work that it takes to write. My mentor had me put up notecards all over my house with "FINISH THE FIRST F\*CKING" DRAFT!" written on them. Think of it as your future stories' GPS system. Then if you actually get published, "PAY IT FORWARD." Find someone to mentor yourself.

Halloween has been and gone! How to you leverage the horror fever that permeates the air around the holiday to the other 11 months of the year?

NELSON: At the Wicked Library, every week is Halloween! It's Christmas for badasses, as I said on a recent episode. Halloween is our favorite time of year, obviously, and we've been trying to make it a bit more special-our third Holiday episode is coming up and we're featuring a few authors again for the show. We do the same for Christmas...except, we call it Christmassacre...

VON STARK: We keep it creepy. And we are badass. Enough said.

Your first live show will be debuting in Season Five. What can you tell us about it?

NELSON: It's still in development, but it'll have most of the elements of the podcast, but with more personnel. In other words, you won't have to look at me the whole time! I believe Maddie will be zooming in for the show once we get the venue dates squared away. I'm hoping this will be something fun we can do season to season or maybe even potentially to take on the road.

VON STARK: We need our own Sirius Radio show, The Wicked Library, Channel 66. Delusions of Grandeur are my thing. Doing the show live will be crookedly wonderful.

If you had to describe your average listener, who would they be? How do you try to reach a diverse audience?

NELSON: I think our listeners are all above average, but that's just me. But in all seriousness, our audience is pretty diverse in general and it's nothing we've done intentionally. The audience is comprised of a wide spectrum of people, and, forgive me if I leave anyone out, but its different races, creeds, religions, sexual preference, rich, not so rich, International, famous, and otherwise. I think the reason is the authors who contribute are so diverse themselves, and their audience tunes in to hear them and, if we're lucky, they stick around to hear who else we have on the show week to week.

VON STARK: I like to think that our audience appreciates the heritage of traditional story telling that Nelson has mastered.

Social media drives a large portion of podcast marketing. How do you think things like Facebook and Twitter help podcast like yours get new listeners on board?

NELSON: I think if there were no Facebook or Twitter, it would be more difficult to get the show to the audience. We rely a lot on word of mouth (and our wonderful sponsors) and lean on Facebook a lot. We've recently ramped up our Twitter postings and have noticed a huge surge of listeners, so I think they do a damn great job in spreading the word about the show.

VON STARK: Social media is the way that most of planet earth communicates. So networking is vital to any creative endeavor.

Before we let you go, we would love for you to give the Sanitarium readers a little more about how they can submit their stories to you. What do they need to do and how can they do it?

NELSON: The best time to submit your work is between seasons, but honestly, we'll read anything, anytime. The guidelines are simple; send in three stories, 5,000 words or less to submissions@thewickedlibrary.com; if it's a previously published story, make sure the rights have reverted back to you. (If the story is still under contract, get the approval from your publisher.) If you've never been published, never fear-that is not a deterrent-a lot of our writers got their first work read on our show.

VON STARK: Keep the lights on!

For more information or just to dive in and listen the to the latest offering, or delve into the back catalouge. Head over to:

thewickedlibrary.com

## WHERE THE HORROR HAPPENS RICH HAWKINS



Can you describe what your workspace is like?

A cheap wooden desk cluttered with books, notepads and small trinkets. There's still room for my laptop and a mug of coffee – I can't write without either! It's all quite cramped, but I prefer it that way.



Do you have a go-to gadget / app or service that you cannot live without?

Sounds obvious, but Google. It's indispensable when doing research for stories.

Do you have a set routine while you work?

My usual routine is to plan a scene by jotting down bullet points on a notepad, then I'll proceed to write the scene with the bullet points to guide me. Sometimes it's a slow process, but I find it works for me.

What is the best piece of advice you have ever received?

Write what you want to write about. Write for yourself. Don't follow trends.

Where do you think the horror genre is headed in the next 12 months?

I'm not sure where it's heading, to be honest. In terms of horror fiction, I think it's going from strength to strength. There's a lot of great work out there, and loads of really talented writers writing in the genre. Zombies are still going strong. I've noticed the subgenre of 'weird fiction' becoming more prominent.

Film-wise, the supernatural/ghost story seems really popular right now, and I can't see the interest waning. Hopefully the 'torture porn' subgenre fades away, as I'm not a fan. I just want to see intelligent horror films with decent characters and storylines.

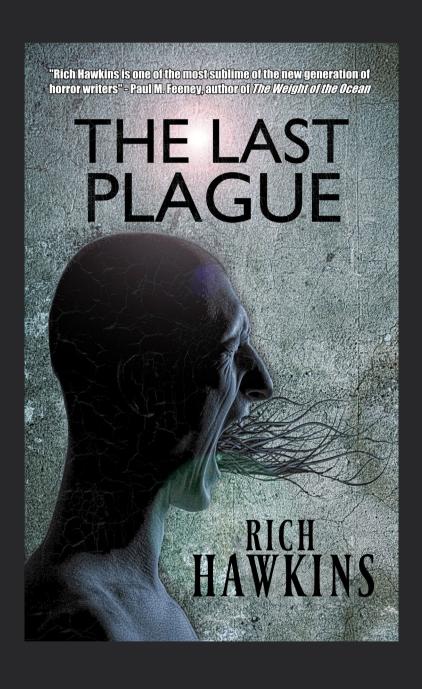
Do you have a final piece of advice for our readers?

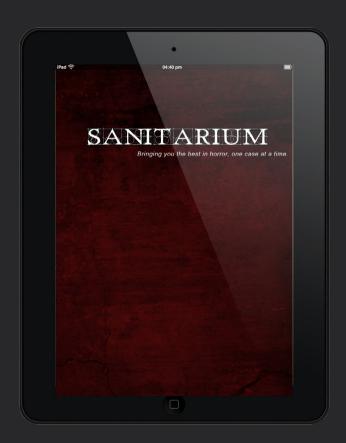
Keep reading horror!

#### **About Rich:**

Rich Hawkins is a horror writer from Salisbury, England. He has several short stories published in various anthologies, and his debut novel 'The Last Plague' was released in August 2014. He likes to write mostly about viral pandemics, cosmic horror and terrifying mutations. He can be found at his blog: http://richwhawkins.blogspot.co.uk/

# ISSUE EXCHEN EIGHE





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